

Opposite page: Ben Waltham, known affectionately as the "Bird man". Photographed with an Osprey in the Spalding Bird Museum workshop December 1949.

# MEMORIES OF THE SPALDING BIRD MUSEUM



by R. P. Merchant

HOW WELL I REMEMBER those magic Saturday afternoons in my youth, in the 1940s. For three consecutive Saturdays each summer the Spalding Gentlemen's Society opened the Bird Museum in Red Lion Street to the general public. Perhaps distance lends enchantment, but I recall the sun was always shining and the visitor entering the museum had to pause for his eyes to adjust to the more subdued light inside the building.

There was one step down from the stone doorstep onto the wooden floor and the first specimen for the visitor to view was a grey and red Parrot suspended from the ceiling, with a written card attached to its beak bearing the message "Mind the step". Immediately beneath him, seated motionless on a wooden chair, was the taxidermist, Mr. Ben Waltham. He sat so still, with his arms folded on his chest and his cap set a little back on his head, that on one memorable occasion a small child was heard to ask in a loud whisper "Is he stuffed as well?" The twinkle in his eyes gave him away.

To me, as a small boy, those visits to the Bird Museum were the highlights of my summer. I went to all three opening days each year, and when I stepped through that green painted door I was in wonderland. The cases of stuffed birds were stacked one on another from floor to ceiling. They covered the walls of that long room and were displayed back to back to form a central island. At first when one entered the museum it was dark, in contrast to the afternoon light outside, but my other senses worked overtime and the wonderful aroma of that room, so long closed up, was a thrill in itself. The scent of turpentine and spirit, of benzene

and mothballs blended together to form one of the most evocative perfumes I know. To this day, when by chance I catch the odour of mothballs or these other chemicals used by the taxidermist I am transported back 30 years to the museum and I find myself smiling and remembering.

## GIGANTIC EMU!

The space between the rows of cases was narrow, perhaps five feet wide, and the viewing always followed a prescribed route. On entering the door we turned right and slowly worked our way down the facing rows of cases. The bottom half of the first wall was covered with a long glass fronted display case in which specimens were set out on simple wooden perches. One of the first, I recall, was a gigantic Emu. A bird I regarded with great awe, as on one occasion I overheard Ben Waltham explaining how the body, when skinned, filled a complete tea-chest. At the end of this large glass case stood a smaller one, entirely filled with Humming Birds. Hundreds of tiny birds, each one a flash of iridescent colour; of blues, greens and reds, and each tiny bird no bigger than a man's finger. The taxidermist was a versatile artist, from Emu to Humming Bird and all points in between. His skill was all embracing.

Next to the Humming Bird case was a door. I recall it vividly. It was painted brown, wood at the bottom and frosted glass at the top. It bore the single word "Private" and I knew, for I had once peeped in when it was left ajar, that this was the holy of holies. The taxidermist's workshop. This was where dead Emu and Eagles, Waders and Gulls were meticulously set up, as if alive again.

The tour continued in an anti-clockwise circle of the room, between the rows of stuffed birds. Cases of Swans, Eagles, Ducks etc., each set in a natural habitat. Some on rocks some on branches, some swimming on glass pools, others suspended by hidden wires from painted skies, frozen in flight. Each scene held my rapt attention until it was succeeded by the wonder of the next.

After completing the downstairs circuit one was once again back to Ben Waltham, seated on his chair. Then one climbed the stairs to the upper floor. This was laid out much the same as the lower floor but it contained in addition cases of birds' eggs. These were laid out in rows on cotton wool and each was neatly labelled.

I used to browse among the exhibits until closing time.

## LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP

My abiding interest in taxidermy eventually led me to approach Mr. Waltham for some advice and a lifelong friendship developed.

The Bird Museum premises was owned by the Spalding Gentlemen's Society and the specimens were the private hobby of one man, Mr. Ashley K. Maples, who was the Society's secretary in 1899 and chairman in 1930. He it was who appointed Ben Waltham, already well known in the area as a taxidermist, to a part-time position at the museum. This started a partnership from which both men gained much.

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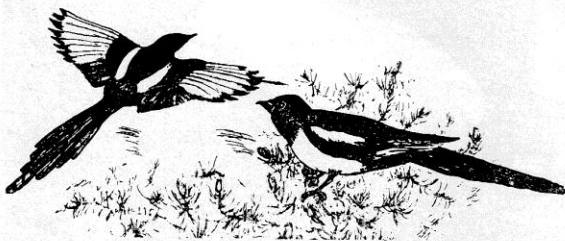


Ashley Maples was a keen and knowledgeable naturalist. He set a high standard for his collection and the records and measurements kept of every specimen received were extensive. Each specimen that Ben set up was scrutinised with the naturalist's eye for authentic detail and the measurements were checked against the records of the original bird. Ben used to admit that he felt apprehensive about these inspections but he was proud of the high standards he reached, because of them. It was a strange but fruitful partnership and Spalding's collection of foreign and British birds was renowned throughout the country. Indeed one contemporary report states that the museum contained 840 specimens of British birds alone, in 160 display cases and covered 80 per cent of the British List.

Many evenings the two men spent together in the museum workshop. Ben skinning and setting up specimens, his 'Guvnor', as he called him, watching the skilled fingers with admiration. Then with the work done some fish and chips, eaten from the paper, seemed a supper fit for a king.

My own introduction to the art of taxidermy was in this same workshop under the watchful eye of 'Uncle Ben', as I then called him. The first bird I ever skinned was a Great Crested Grebe and I was very proud of the result. The room had the same unique odour that pervaded the display rooms but much stronger. The shelves were like Aladdin's Cave, for each was lined with tobacco tins, filled with glass eyes of every conceivable size and colour, to match birds from any part of the world. Other tins contained mysterious powders; Burnt Alum and Saltpetre and occasionally a bottle or jar marked 'Poison'. Everywhere were the tools of the trade. Scalpels and knives, scissors and pliers, wire of every possible gauge, dried skins and spare feathers, cakes of beeswax, rolls of thread, dried mosses and grasses and many empty display stands.

I remember well being startled by the sight of a brown snake coiled on a shelf, its head raised ready to strike, but it remained in that position and was there, motionless, on every visit I made.



#### LADIES HATS

On some occasions I visited Ben at his home in Queen's Road Spalding. There he had a large heated greenhouse and part of this was used as a studio, being warm and ideal for drying specimens. He would tell me of his private practice; of the past, when the fashion for birds on ladies hats kept him busy setting up Seagulls and Swallows in flight to grace the heads of those fashion conscious ladies. He talked of the three

legged chickens and two headed sheep set up for showmen at Skegness and other east coast resorts. It was a very easy matter to sew on an extra leg or head. The less bizarre but more usual trade of the taxidermist was much in evidence too. Half finished cases for Duck and Pheasant. Stuffed fish drying on their base boards and household pets which people wished preserved—the budgerigars, canaries and occasionally even a dog.

Ben painted his cases in oil colours and made his rocks from cork and paper. He even made his trees from wood wool and wire, believing that the introduction of real branches and rocks into a case would risk introducing mite or moth to damage the specimens.



#### GENTLEMEN'S SOCIETY

With the death of Ashley Maples in 1950 the Bird Museum's days were numbered. The collection was willed to the Gentlemen's Society but due to lack of funds they were forced to sell the premises in February 1953 and the main body of the collection was subsequently given on loan to Leicester Museum.

A few cases of British Birds were put on permanent display in Ayscoughfee Hall, Churchgate, Spalding, where they can be seen by the visitor, but this is a cold building with a stone floor and I fear the birds will not last long in this environment.

Today it is extremely unlikely that such a collection could be formed again. Modern views on conservation would rightly preclude the killing of so many birds, but Spalding Bird Museum was one of the last of many large private collections and was in a great Victorian tradition. Each collection owed its existence to a dedicated naturalist with the necessary vision and funds, a man like Ashley Maples and to a taxidermist who could match that vision, an artist like Ben Waltham.

For several years after the closure of the Red Lion Street premises Ben continued to look after the collection at Ayscoughfee Hall but finally age forced him to retire and he limited himself to setting up a few specimens at home and to drawing and painting the birds he had spent a lifetime studying. He died aged 90 in 1975 and with him the final link with an era.

