

A GLIMPSE INTO TURVEY'S PAST NATURAL HISTORY

We are fortunate to have at the Abbey a copy of a Scrapbook compiled by John Higgins from 1830 until 1845. John was a cousin of the first Higgins to occupy the Abbey in 1789, and the father of Charles Longuet Higgins to whom we owe the rebuilding of most of Turvey, including the church, in the mid nineteenth century. The Scrapbook is full of fascinating bits and pieces ranging from pious poems and prayers to long items on the possible past history of Turvey, and of the Abbey in particular. Hidden among these are a few natural history notes which deserve to see the light of day.

Starting with birds: the Scrapbook provides pictures and brief descriptions of what may be the earliest Bedfordshire records for whooper swan, Egyptian goose and red-throated diver. The swan is pictured well-dead after being shot on 15th January 1830 by Thomas Benbow, the gamekeeper at Turvey Abbey. It is described as a wild swan with a length from bill to claws of five feet three inches and a weight of nineteen pounds – and a whooper seems to fit the bill, so to speak. These swans are as large as our resident mute swans but only visit us occasionally in winter and most probably from Iceland. They have a wonderful shoop-shoop call which gives them their name.

The Egyptian goose record is not dated except to say it was slightly wounded 'some years ago' at Turvey, again by Thomas Benbow, and kept 'a considerable time' at the pond in the Abbey gardens. Although John was hesitant about its correct identification the pictures does seem to resemble an Egyptian goose and some were known to have been introduced at Woburn Abbey during the nineteenth century. This one unfortunately ended up in the jaws, and presumably the stomach, of a fox after the pond froze up!

The red-throated diver was caught by a man from Stagsden in an open field and brought to John Higgins. He describes it as a 'speckled diver' and the picture does seem to match a red-throated diver in winter plumage. These are still very rare winter visitors to Bedfordshire unless oiled or storm-wrecked, their usual winter habitat being the open sea. This one too came to a sad end at Turvey, being caught by a dog.

Next time, perhaps – a look at some past records of insects.

Br John