

2-865.

A NATURE DAIRY  
FOR THE YEAR  
1 8 9 5

Edward Baker

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1,922 words.

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A NATURE DIARY OF 1895

Whilst turning out a desk, I chanced upon an old notebook belonging to my father, a small black-covered book, some five inches by three, of cheap absorbent paper, his name written inside the cover, in a fine bold hand...

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B.

The notes, very clearly written in black ink, are mainly of archeological and theological interest, for although mainly self-taught, he was a scholar at heart. There are quotations from Seneca and Fuller, and then, half-way through, some thirty pages of nature notes, covering the whole year of 1895.

My father was the eldest of a family of six, his father being a foreman at the London docks, although he had served an apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker. As far as I know, the family's roots went far back into East London. My father was employed as a clerk by a firm of meat importers of Smithfield, whose wharf was at Blackfriars, where he spent much of his time. In his recreational time, he was closely connected with S. Luke's Church, Stepney, and was a voluntary worker at Dr Barnado's Homes. He married late in life, and I was his only child, born in 1913. Ill-health forced him to a premature retirement, and he died in 1927 at the early age of 56. He was twenty-four years of age when he wrote these notes.

1895

The months of January and February were noted for the very severe cold of the weather, most of the water-pipes in London being frozen. In January a remarkable storm took place, it hailing, raining, and blowing, with thunder and lightning. Great numbers of gulls came up the river, small ones, grey, with brown-tipped wings. The river was full of ice so that a person was able to cross it at London Bridge. All this continued until the beginning of March, when the gulls left.

The gulls were fed by many people who took great delight in watching their graceful flight. They often alighted on the water, but did not appear to swim, but merely floated. In flight they did not seem to move their wings at all. Puffs of wind coming under the Bridge (Blackfriars) seemed to greatly put them out as they turned over several times. They seemed to me to take advantage of the wind very much while in flight and this knowledge which is no doubt the result of experience will be an argument against the flying machine.

Now, the beginning of March, it has set in fine, the weather being very warm, in the sun quite hot. Last night (10th) an eclipse of the Moon took place, but I did not see it. My water tortoise has begun again to be lively, walking about the house. The canary has also just again begun to sing. The cat has been sick, bringing up worms, long thread-like things. She was dosed with castor oil.

March 12th. Yesterday, the 11th, was very fine and bright and today appears to be the same. Saw one gull on the river. Evidently, Spring has commenced and the birds have left, or are leaving us.

Sunday, March 17.

Fine but misty day. Went in morning to Victoria Park. Tulips just coming out, ducks swimming, sparrows flying about.

In an aviary noticed Indian Pheasant with two brown-colored hens, a great contrast to the handsome scarlet, gold and long speckled brown tailed cock. Noticed also ring-doves, fantails and a blackbird.

In the other section of park, deer are kept, also goats., one a hairy-faced mountain goat. A Palm house in the same section, with India-rubber plants, Norfolk Island Pines, and many varieties of plants.

Mar. 23.

The last two days the weather has been quite bright and fine. The sparrows are now beginning in the morning to chirp in the trees at the back. The tortoise has quite got over his winter sleep, and now walks about quite lively.

March 27

Weather now dull and raining. Birds quiet, tortoise has however been rather lively lately. Nights lately have been rather chilly, but plenty of stars out, and pleasant for walking. Now the gulls have entirely left the river. Nothing just now of any importance to chronicle.

April 12th. Good Friday

A nice pleasant warm day. For the first time I noticed that the buds on the trees are budding into leaf. The birds seem now settled in their particular trees. Up to now the tortoise has not yet eaten anything, neither has the canary begun to sing. Church this morning was well attended.

April 13th

Weather still keeping fine..every promise of a fine Easter.

May 6th.

The weather is now very sunny and bright. Last night (Sunday) it was light up till 8.30 p.m. The weather is chilly at night but the sky is usually clear, the stars and moon being very bright. The trees have now put on their green leaves, but the

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oak at the bottom of the yard appears to be backward.

May 7th.

Weather today very warm and fine. This morning I saw a piece of light white material, either blistledown or a piece of wool floating high in the air. Two sparrows at once flew at it, buffeting each other with their wings, but soon flew away from it without touching it. Another sparrow flew up but did not attempt to touch the substance.

June 18th.

The long interval between the present entry and the last shows the great difficulty of keeping a diary of Natural History in London. There are so few things to notice that there seems only the weather to keep account of. Still it is worthy of notice that a small water tortoise that I had given me has died, but the first one is still doing well.

July 22nd

Yesterday (Sunday) we had a tremendous shower of hail, accompanied by thunder and rain. This is much needed, as in this district we have had our water on each day for only two hours. Today it promises fine. The trees look now much better for the rain.

August

During this month, I went on my annual holiday to Tatsfield. The house I went to is situated down a valley surrounded by hills. On the hill opposite the house wild mint grows in abundance together with clover, heather, long grass, buttercups, &c. We saw one day a squirrel, he climbed rapidly up the tree barking as he went. I caught one night several grasshoppers, some were brownish, some reddish, some green. I caught a frog, but it escaped during the night. On my return home I let the grasshoppers loose in the garden, but I fancy they all died,

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The weather on the whole has been hot. Thunderstorms have occurred, being very fierce., great damage being done and persons being killed in the country.

Sept. 10th.

In the garden this morning the trees are turning brown. Noticed a large garden spider. Weather warm, rather close.

Last Saturday (Sept. 8th) went to Indian Exhibition. Noticed large snakes, small alligators, macaws, mynahs, blue-faced mandrills, and very fine lions. Elephants and camels looked well, also small zebus. Diana monkey and small marmosets looked well. A curious freak of nature, a six-legged cow is there. The two superfluous legs hang just under the tail. They are drawn up. The animal looks in good condition. Also (stuffed) a small two-headed and six-legged calf. A specimen of Indian sacred monkey is there also.

Sept. 30

The weather here has been very hot- average about 80°, nevertheless the leaves on the trees are turning brown and falling fast. The sparrows are very numerous in the park, which on the whole looks very fine. The tortoise has disappeared, and I have no idea where it has gone.

October 8th.

On Saturday the fifth, in the evening the most curious incident I have ever heard of occurred. It appears that a cat, presumably from the cemetery, got into the house at about 7 in the evening, and went into the parlour. On some of the family going after it, it took a leap at the right hand lowest window, making a hole about five inches across, and "starring" the pane of glass over the lowest half.

On Sunday the tortoise turned up alive, and I think well.

Oct. 29th

The weather is now getting extremely cold and foggy at night. The roads in the morning are covered with white frost and so are also the ropes of the market carts &c. The leaves are fast disappearing off the trees, and scarcely any sparrows are now to be seen. I hear that gulls have made their appearance on the river but I have not yet seen or noticed any myself.

Nov. 6th.

The weather just lately has been very bad, wet and dull, the place also very muddy. Last night a severe storm of wind and rain came on, but this morning is very fine and mild. I saw myself, for the first time, a number of gulls on the river at Blackfriars. I take it that the weather being so bad has driven them inland. The leaves have now gone off the trees, but the chrysanthemums at the shows and in the gardens seem very good.

Nov. 12th.

Nearly every day for the last week has been very wet, but last Saturday on Lord Mayor's Day it was fine and warm. Gulls still are on the river, but there seems nothing else important to chronicle.

It is worthy of note to make a few remarks about the London Pigeons. At the Custom House in Lower Thames Street, at the Stock Exchange and at the British Museum, these birds abound, some of them being very fine birds. Those at the Cathedral are fed by people who go to the Churchyard. There are small flocks at Cannon St. Station and at Ludgate Hill Station. In the Parks are to be found wood-pigeons.

Dec. 2nd.

During the latter part of Nov. the weather was very wet and bad, causing several people to be ill. I went one Sunday morning to the Victoria Park and saw the chrysanthemums. I have never seen such splendid things and was glad that I did see them.

Since this last date the weather has been sometimes very cold, sometimes mild, very wet, foggy, and damp. On several fine days I have noted the gulls at Blackfriars Bridge.

The weather this day is fine and mild.

Here ends for the year 1895 this diary. It will be seen that it is often incomplete, often vague and with no connected idea running through it. This is simply owing to the great difficulty of observation in such a place as the East End of London.

Still it has been a pleasure to write even this and no doubt better will be done in the future.

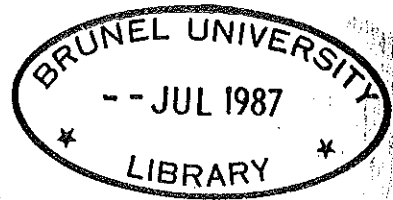
F I N I S

W.W.E. Baker

Notes on Grasshoppers.

The August of 1895. On the first week of this month I spent at a place called Tatsfield near the town of Westerham on the borders of Surrey and Kent. This is a place almost without water, and very hilly with valleys. Here I found a considerable number of grasshoppers. I was always given to understand that the colour of this animal is green. My surprise therefore was great when I found the most of them were either red or of a brownish hue. The general colour of the grass was certainly green, with none of those reddish or brownish tints. Sometimes it was seen that much wild thyme grew near but (I do not know) whether this has anything to do with their peculiar colour.





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If we had been to the Saturday afternoon showing, we would return home and have tea, before setting out for the week-end shopping. We would leave the house about six, for in those days shops remained open until 11.00 P.m. on a Saturday. The most exciting time was the winter, for we would go through the quiet darkness of the side streets to emerge suddenly into the brightness and bustle of the High Road. The High Road was full of shoppers under the glare of the street lighting, and as we went towards the shops, passing the Academy where we had so recently spent such happy hours, pitying the queues waiting to see what we had already seen, we skirted Harrow Green, its dark shrubs sinister behind green-painted iron railings. It was known as "Itchy Park" and I was forbidden to enter it at night. Later a flood-lit phallic War Memorial was erected there, but it was still a place to be avoided.

The greatest contrast to the present day shopping centre was the open-ness of the shops. Every shop, butcher, fish-shop, greengrocer, was open to the pavement, with the shopkeeper standing before, drawing attention to his wares with a vociferousness now only met with in the more uninhibited street-markets.

The butcher's was hung with scarlet meat from pavement up the the first storey, exactly like those wooden

models of butcher's shops, occasionally to be seen in museums, before which stood the butcher, straw-hatted, blue aproned, flourishing cleaver and steel. As my father worked in Smithfield, he was knowledgeable about meat, and would pause for a friendly word before making a purchase. I recall that one afternoon, there was to be a march of the unemployed on the Union, as it was called. This must have been considerably prior to the General Strike of 1926. "If any of these swine try to loot my shop," said the butcher, "the first one gets my steel right through him." There were in fact no attempts at looting, and the procession passed in a quite orderly manner, weary, pallid and tired. But I clung to my father's hand and watched with horror, for I had seen films about the French Revolution, and I wondered, could this be the terrible Mob?

But to return to our evening's shopping. We would go on to the greengrocer's, under hissing naphtha flares, the fruit piled high, with three or four salesmen in front. In those days there was no shortage of shop assistants.

The fish shop was white and grey and cold, where the butchers was red and bright.

Besides these there were many others, deriving I suppose from the bulk-shops of the eighteenth century, with stalls

before them on the broad pavement, china, toys, flowers. One shop had no stall before it, but the window was full of tier upon tier of little cages, each about a foot square, containing singing-birds, not only canaries, but larks, linnets, and thrushes, Budgerigars were as yet unknown.

There was a blacksmith's, with the forge fire glowing in the rear, a sight of perpetual fascination, particularly to home-going schoolboys. Then there was the fire-station, where I once attended a party for firemen's children, my invitation being through an uncle who was a fireman. Then the dark facade of the police station, and here we usually crossed the road, to "return on the other side." The other side was no less magical. The oil-shop with its rack of paraffin..even the bundles of firewood neatly stacked before the counter smelt of it..and then would come the ritual for which I had been longing all the time... "changing the books."

The nearest Public Library was far away at Leyton, so we never thought of joining, but this book-shop, in common with one or two others scattered up the length of Leytonstone High Road, had a system of purchase and exchange of magazines which was our substitute.

Entering the shop, there were what can only be described as troughs round the walls, each full of magazines stood

upright, in varying conditions, the best still retaining their covers, others ragged and dog-eared, but roughly sorted. My father would return those we had obtained the previous week, and I suppose was handed some sort of token, and then he and I, for my mother was content to accept our researches, would rummage with delight until the agonising decisions were made. We exchanged about six magazines a week, enough to supply us with reading matter until the next Saturday, and amongst the six I was always allowed to choose my own "My Magazine" or "Children's Magazine", and occasionally "The Boy's Own Paper." When I grew older I sometimes expressed a preference for "The Captain!" but my father would always urge the more serious periodicals, and indeed I may say that I really think I learned as much, if not more from them than ever I did at school..at least, in subjects which interested me.

My parents would choose from the many magazines that were on sale in those days.. "The Story-Teller," "Pearson's" "The Argosy", there were dozens of them..and best beloved of all "The Strand" for this had pictures, where some of the others had not, and "Zig-Zags at the Zoo." It is a sad commentary on the decline of civilisation when one obtains one of these old publications, and observes the sheer quality ..the illustrations..and

the contributors, Wells, Kipling, Conan Doyle, Mason, G. Lawton, where now could they be matched? Or even approached?

We seldom read hard-backs, as they are now called, unless purchased second-hand, and these would be passed all round the family, to aunts and uncles before they finally came to rest on my father's bookshelves. In the back room upstairs, which I called my play-room, he had rough wooden shelves along one wall, full of his beloved books, with a green curtain before them. Sometimes, instead of going to Church, he would decide to spend Sunday morning dusting his books, and would usually be found, hours after, deep in the first one he had taken down, duster unsoiled.

But this is a digression, and we have made our last purchases but one, no less important. There would be a discussion between my parents on what should we have for supper... fish and chips or faggots and pease-pudding. If the former, we would go down a little side street, and standing at the high marble counter, purchase "Three twopenny skates and a pennyworth"... ample provender for all three of us. If we decided on the latter, we had first to return home and get a china bowl with which my father and I would return to the shop which purveyed cooked meats, and

three penny faggots and twopennyworth of pease pudding, the whole being sloshed into the basin and covered with a sheet of paper. Sometimes I was allowed to carry it and with the warm bowl hugged to my chest we would hurry home, dodging the horses and carts, waiting for the trams to grind clanging by, up to Whipp's Cross or down to Stratford Broadway, back to the warm house, where the fire had been replenished, and the table laid, and under the hissing gas-light would enjoy the delicious meal. Then I would have my cocoa and be sent to bed. As I grew older, I would be allowed to stay up to look at my new book, but after a time, my father would declare that the gas was bad for my eyes, and I would go up reluctantly, to think over the films I had seen, while below, from the kitchen, I could hear the drone of my father's voice, as he read aloud one of the stories to my mother, as she sat at her perpetual darning and mending.

Oh, well! Tomorrow would be Sunday, with a special dinner and perhaps we would go in the afternoon to see my Grandfather and all my cousins....and that is another story.