

John Trueman and his Disputed Butterflies of Sherwood Forest

By Martin White

Abstract

In 1875, noted ornithologist and sometime lepidopterist, William Sterland, published an article detailing two accounts outlining the butterflies and moths of Sherwood Forest (Sterland, 1875). The first account, circa 1810-1853, at times aiding debate with divisive footnotes and second-hand hearsay, is almost universally shunned by critics, because it was, and still is, thought to contain too many implausible species not found duplicated in the second account, circa 1859-1874. Judging by the amount of missed detail, hapless misunderstandings and outright make-believe, it would appear that all or nearly all critics, for or against, must have either misread this work, given it only a cursory glance or indeed never read it in the first place. To the list of hopeless critics must be added my own name, having previously placed in print two statements which in hindsight should not have been accepted at face value (White, 2000). This article hopes to diffuse a better and more balanced discussion by the application of greater sense and sensitivity to an already controversial subject.

Introduction

The past was richer in the rarities of today. They were more various, abundant and widespread within cogent ecologies with long-honed stable communities which have since largely vanished in direct proportion to the restless growth of humanity. This is not to say that bio-diversity is the antithesis of people. Far from it, despite the contemporary excess of monoculture landscapes, humans create a greater, though not necessarily superior bio-diversity than nature by itself would allow. The majority of today's nature reserves, re-wilding areas and back-gardens, albeit diverse, are alas no more than ruderal mistakes where whimsy plays as much a part in the presence of one or two disparate rarities as does coherent design.

Conversely, axiophyte or non-causal rarities, are maintained by sometimes complex relationships implored by nature's sole efficiency to shoulder limited diversity into steady community relationships. Mankind's seemingly innate inefficiency is to cause extinction by the removal of key elements from these clockwork ecosystems and place within them a buccaneer diversity, sometimes excessively so. The prize of reversing these trends by mass precision species re-establishment, widespread clearance and replanting is largely viewed as non-politic by lazy thinkers who fail to realise even at its zenith, our very best countryside is still the result of a dreadfully oppressed wilderness.

Any student wishing to identify the whereabouts of our foremost ecologies for possible re-wilding could therefore do a lot worse than utilise the especially early, well-documented studies of our habitat-specific butterfly populations. It would perhaps be a needless shame to dismiss without proper enquiry a very early account of nineteenth century butterflies because (in part) urbanisation, industry and more intensive land-use had unquestionably taken its sad toll on a later version.

The Players

William John Sterland was born at Ollerton in October 1815 and his major preoccupation, starting from the 1840's, was to catalogue the ornithology for Sherwood. As a young man he toured and wrote of Australia, returning to his native village by 1837 to work at his father's general store. Apart from a few childhood nature studies, all his personal Sherwood Forest undertakings were seemingly made between c.1840 and 1856; these experiences being published in *The Field* from 1865 to 1867 (Bradbury, 1985). He published just a solitary account of a Sherwood Forest butterfly which he himself had personally encountered (Sterland, 1875). What became of him later in life is purely speculative, with one self-doubting interpretation claiming, "he apparently died in the 1880's". And that he, "may be the same William John Sterland... who died in Ramsgate on 20th August 1881"; possibly taking up residence there from 1859 after selling his business interests inherited via his late father in 1853 (Bradbury, 1985). Other far less reliable chroniclers offer the reader the chance to suspend incredulity to its furthest reach with stories of positively ancient Sterland encountering Sherwood Forest butterflies well into the 20th century (Pendleton & Pendleton, 2011 & 2013).

In 1869 he published his major work on the Birds of Sherwood Forest which initially was met with great reviews and was especially well received by locals. However, a number of his bird reports have since been seriously questioned and the first stirrings of disquiet started not long after publication and continue to the present day. Edward Newman, onetime fellow small business proprietor, lampooned his work quite badly, although to be fair he lampooned himself with the same vigour (Newman, 1871). Sterland's major problem was his equal weight given to rumour or hearsay from whatever source and a lot of confusion exists between which species are intended and these would have to be dismissed by modern standards of ornithological validation, pers. com. Chris Butler, 2020. By implication, the same confusion of intention has to extend to his hearsay reports of butterflies. Conversely, his second-hand Lepidoptera records are all apparently fully acknowledged as such offering caution to the reader without hint of hidden agenda or unprincipled bias.

In 1875 Sterland published details from what survived of the late John Trueman's early nineteenth century manuscripts on the butterflies and moths of Sherwood Forest and that of later researcher Richard Brameld. Prior to printing, around 1874, Brameld was shown or sent an early draft of the Trueman part of the composition, so that if necessary valuable footnotes could be added to supplement Sterland's self-acknowledged deficiency. Indeed, Brameld was considered "a very industrious and careful observer" by Sterland, and he does criticise the inclusion of three species on the Trueman list. Sterland seemingly publishes the Trueman account unaltered and, apparently, adds all of Brameld's options and counter-opinions; again possibly belying the character of what any unbiased research investigator would do (Sterland, 1875). However, a supposed feud existed between Brameld and Sterland, with the latter making up records to better those of the former. To quote Trevor and Dilys Pendleton of Eakring Bird Group, "R E Brameld and Sterland seem to have been the most active recorders of Sherwood's Lepidoptera a century ago, with possibly some competition between the two, leading to some dubious records on Sterland's side." (Pendleton & Pendleton, 2011). With several years separating the works of the two men, the ever-unassuming Sterland's personally published sighting of just one solitary Sherwood Forest butterfly made well beforehand juxtaposed to his unabashed praise of and publication of hundreds of Brameld's later records and opinions, all in all, cannot rationally be construed as competition or rivalry between the pair. The most obvious duplicity leading to dubious records in this whole sorry saga comes not from the minds of either Sterland or Brameld but emerges fully formed without any sense of irony or injustice with the arrival of twenty-first century.

John Trueman, well known as an entomologist, was born at Edwinstowe on 3rd May 1802. He never married and lived his entire life at “Trueman’s Yard”, earning a living as a shoemaker. He is described as, “a little man, about five feet five inches tall in stature, with a broad and lofty forehead, over which his black hair stands erect, and a pair of large dark eyes in his head, which are at once merry and thoughtful” (Searle, 1850). Many were the rare insects his intelligent industry collected, including beetles, butterflies and moths of Sherwood Forest from a boy of around seven years and concluding only with his unfortunate death on Tuesday, 3rd May 1853. He was apparently killed in a collision with an omnibus on his 51st birthday together with the pony he was riding while returning home from the races at Boughton Brake (Anon, 1853a). A large, but plain, monument commemorating his indefatigable contribution to entomology was erected over his grave by village subscription next to Edwinstowe church (Anon, 1853b).

In a text constructed from elements of manuscripts held at and published by Nottingham University, John Trueman is recognized as just one of several locals who became professional insect collectors selling moths and other insects to national collections (Sylva, c.2010). Perhaps he made some money selling insects, but certainly not as a profession. In a far more reliable quote made by a personal friend, Christopher Thomson (1799-1871), “To the entomologist, Birkland offers a fine field of research. Mr Trueman of Edwinstowe, a scientific and devoted lover of that branch of natural history, has enriched the cabinets of the curious, as well as our national collection in the British Museum, by his recent discoveries. His cabinet of British insects, may be ranked amongst the best in the county, containing as it does, some of the rarest specimens, particularly so in the coleopterous branches of the science” (Thomson, 1847). Trueman evidently did donate a pair of beetle specimens, *Hylecaetus dermestoides*, collected in Sherwood to the Entomological Society on 4th October 1841 and discovered the beetle “*Ferridus nitidus*” = *Teredus cylindricus* in “Old Birkland” new to England (Trueman, 1841; Anon, 1839). And, from a personal interview with January Searle in 1850 [paraphrased using first-person pronouns], “On dark nights I go into the Forest with a pot of rum and honey which I smear over the bark of trees, to lure the insects I wishes to take,” (Searle, 1850).

With the apparent encouragement of his enlightened father, Reuben (1777-1840), he formed one of the finest collections of British insects outside London, though none of his notebooks, memoranda or any specimens indicating his provenance are known to survive. Reuben is credited by one of his grandsons in 1908 as someone who, “died at Edwinstowe about fifty years ago, was a clever naturalist, whose collection of entomological specimens was purchased by the trustees of the British Museum.” (Rodgers, 1908). This is doubtful and probably confusion between grandfather and uncle as the calculated date of death is contemporary with that of John, and despite the veritable detail written about Reuben both during his life and shortly thereafter, no mention whatever is made earlier than 1908 of his supposed entomological or natural history exploits (Jackson, c.1977).

A good deal of what insect data of John Trueman we have comes indirectly down to us via two chroniclers; Thomas Desvignes [beetles] and William Sterland [butterflies and macro-moths] (Desvignes, 1841; Sterland, 1875). Desvignes (1812-1868) work was drawn from visiting him in person and Sterland’s from some personal effects placed into his hands twenty or so years after he died in 1853. Sterland considered it, “a matter of regret that on his untimely death his whole collection should not have been retained within the county, but it was sold in London and dispersed”. An obvious guess would be his surviving mother and beneficiary, Ann (1781-1865) may have held past visitor, Thomas Desvignes of London as

particularly “well-healed” and his good offices at 2, Golden Square could have witnessed their earliest despatch to find remuneration. Desvignes was known to buy collections and shortly following his death in 1868 some 6,881 specimens, including his acquisitions, were purchased by the British Museum, with the remainder sold at auction by Stevens of London and therefore would have been dispersed within the capital. British Museum catalogues of entomological acquisitions being incomplete up to his period offering no further clues (Anon, 1868a; Anon, 1868b; Stevens, 1868).

Despite my statement in *The AES Bulletin*, Volume 59, page 227, no mention whatever of specimens from which Sterland could possibly glean information is originally attested (Carr 1916; White, 2000). All had apparently long since been disposed by the time he took up the project around 1874, stating, that for his undertakings only a limited portion of Trueman’s personal archive had “been placed in my hands by a friend of his”. Such is the ephemera of the written word, so combustible and fetching so little, we are exceedingly luckily his relatives gave away some of these “worthless materials” without consigning the whole to the flames.

The ever-engaging Pendletons credit him with catching a noteworthy species of butterfly in Birklands and Bilhough in 1899 (Pendleton & Pendleton, 2011).

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