

◆ Reading Gilbert White

W. D. PARISH'S ANNOTATIONS OF *THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE*

By Felicity Stimpson

*In his Introduction to the 1877 edition of Gilbert White's classic text *The natural history and antiquities of Selborne*, Frank Buckland writes: 'There is hardly a parish in England or Wales where the clergyman has not opportunities more or less favourable for writing a local "White's Selborne".' The Reverend W. D. Parish (1833-1904), Vicar of Selmeston with Alciston (East Sussex) from 1863 until his death, took up the challenge by annotating his own copy of this edition of White's work with observations of nature, life and customs around Selmeston which, like Selborne, sits within the South Downs. The annotations are chatty in style and often humorous, and give an insight into country life at the end of the 19th century, but they are not haphazard. Parish wrote an introduction giving his raison d'être for his work, and an index to his notes. The resulting book, which, re-bound in two volumes, he had had interleaved with blank pages on which he wrote his notes and added sketches and newspaper cuttings, was given to Parish's old school, Charterhouse, soon after his death. It provides an opportunity to study an example of close reading and to observe the profound effect that a book can have on its readers. This article begins by comparing the lives of White and Parish and continues by examining and analysing the annotations.*

On 14 March 1905, Gerald Henry Rendall, Headmaster of Charterhouse, received a letter from Lancelot Ridley Phelps, former pupil, Fellow and later Provost of Oriel College, Oxford:

I hope you will allow me the pleasure of presenting to the Library a book which I found lately in a second-hand catalogue. It is an edition of that immortal work White's *Selborne* - it was the property of that loyal Carthusian W. D. Parish, & he has enriched it with many notes in MS. with cuttings from newspapers & the like.

There can be no place so appropriate to it as the Charterhouse Library & if you can find room for it there, it will add another to the many which connect the college of the author with the school of the annotator.

The 1877 Macmillan edition of Gilbert White's *Natural history and antiquities of Selborne*, with notes by Frank Buckland (1826-80), a popular writer of natural history, and illustrations by P. H. Delamotte, was indeed placed in the library of Charterhouse school where it remains today, an item of interest and speculation to book and local historians alike. Phelps's letter is now pasted inside. The volume had been removed from its publisher's binding by its

owner, William Douglas Parish, and re-bound into two volumes, each printed leaf being interleaved with blank paper on which we can see manuscript notes written in Parish's neat hand along with newspaper and magazine cuttings (Fig. 1). On a preliminary leaf Parish indicates the purpose of the annotations, while at the end of the volume he has created a manuscript index to the whole. These two volumes stand as testament to the way in which one author can profoundly influence another. Parish, who had died just six months before Phelps's letter, on 23 September 1904, was a country clergyman whose life and interests in some ways mirror White's own. Before considering his life, however, I shall very briefly summarise Gilbert White's life and work.

Gilbert White (1720-93) is closely associated with the small village of Selborne in Hampshire where he was born and later served as curate, but never as vicar: the living was in the gift of Magdalen College and White was a graduate of Oriel. He was not an especially conscientious clergyman. Like many of his time he was happy to be offered curacies, such as Moreton Pinkney in Northamptonshire, in a non-residential capacity and to pay others to do such minimal parish duties as were then considered necessary. He returned as

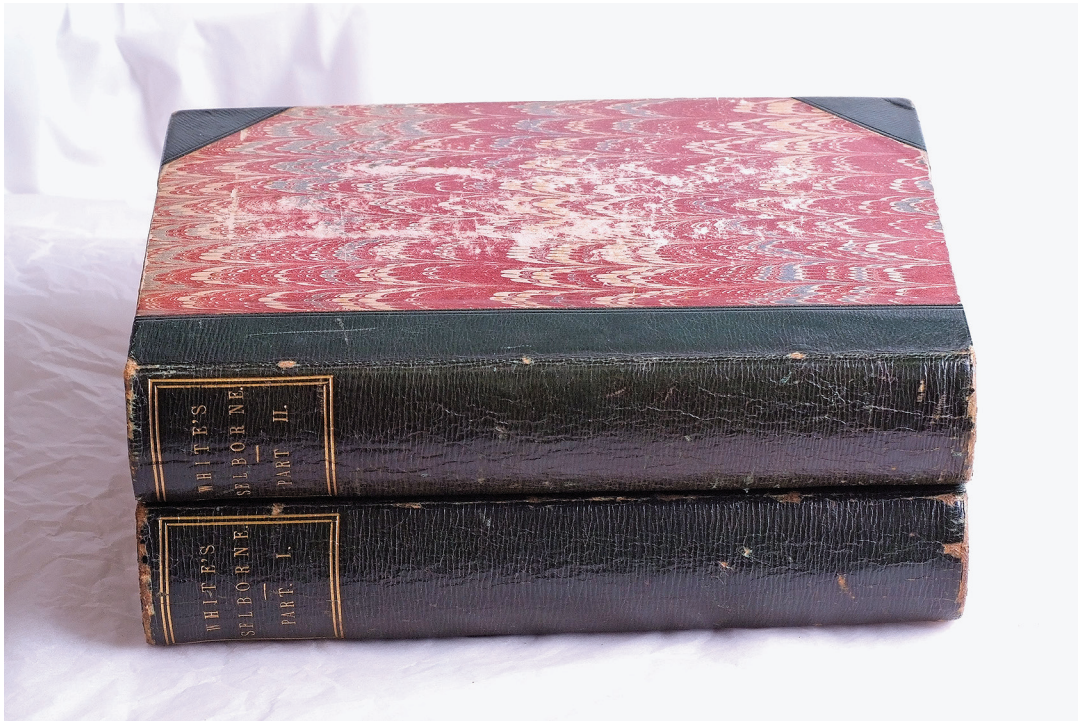


Fig. 1. The bound copy of White's *Natural history of Selborne* in the Rare Books Collection in Charterhouse library.

often as he was able to Selborne, on four separate occasions as curate, eventually inheriting the family house, The Wakes, in which he had grown up. But although he neglected his parochial duties, he was a keen gardener, experimenter and observer of nature and, writing from a detailed knowledge of one small, secluded Hampshire parish, he created a literary masterpiece. Gilbert White's *Natural history* is one of the best known and loved works of English literature. Published first in December 1788 (although its imprint has 1789), it has never been out of print and is said to have influenced many writers, Charles Darwin and Edward Thomas among them. Based on letters written to the zoologist Thomas Pennant and other writings and observations, White details the natural history of Selborne in the second half of the 18th century and sets this within a broader scientific context. His letters cover the weather, the flora and fauna, theories of bird migration, local superstitions, and much else. Richard Mabey writes of the work:

In the journals of his mature years, Gilbert White was one of the first writers to show that it was possible to write of the natural world

with a fresh and intensely personal vision without in any way sacrificing precision. ... [He formed] a bridge between two different views of nature: the old superstitious views which nonetheless included humans as part of the natural scheme of things, and the more rational but also more alienated view of contemporary science.¹

William Douglas Parish, born over a hundred years after White, was the son of Sir Woodbine Parish (1796–1882), a diplomat, whose posts included chargé d'affaires in Buenos Aires from 1825 to 1833. Sir Woodbine was a keen geologist and palaeontologist, publishing in these fields, and occasionally corresponding with Charles Darwin. He was a Norfolk man, but on his marriage he moved to St Leonard's-on-Sea, East Sussex. He had five sons and three daughters by his first wife, Amelia, and two sons by his second wife, Louisa. William was born in 1833, the fifth son of Amelia, who died two years later.² Unlike his father, who had been educated for a year at Eton, William was sent to Charterhouse from 1848 to 1853 where he enjoyed playing cricket and captained the school team in his

final year.³ At this time, the school was still based in Smithfield in central London, on the site of an old Carthusian monastery. It moved to its present site in Godalming in 1872. Although we shall see that he seems not to have looked back on his schooldays too fondly, in 1879 he edited the *List of Carthusians, 1800–1870*, a work for which a later compiler, R. L. Arrowsmith, felt ‘his name should be remembered with gratitude’, despite criticising it as being ‘by modern standards inadequate in concept and by any standards hopelessly inaccurate.’ Nonetheless, ‘I was assured by one who had known him well that he wrote endless letters in furtherance of it.’⁴

From Charterhouse, Parish went to Trinity College, Oxford, and graduated BCL in 1858. He was ordained deacon in 1859 and priest the following year. He served as curate at Firle from 1859 until 1863, when he was presented to the benefices of Selmeston and Alciston, two parishes less than four miles from Firle and eight miles from Lewes, the county town of East Sussex. He remained there, living in the vicarage at Selmeston, until his death in 1904.

Thus, like Gilbert White, Parish is very firmly identified with a specific geographical location, spending all his life in Sussex, apart from his time

at school and university (Figs 2 (a) and (b)). Unlike White, he was lucky enough to be presented at a young age to livings which suited him well and, being worth £255 a year, were well-remunerated for the time.⁵ White, as we have seen, was never able to be Vicar of Selborne, and was obliged to spend a good part of his life elsewhere. Parish must have seen himself very much as a Sussex man. He was fascinated by its culture and history, publishing *A dictionary of the Sussex dialect and collection of provincialisms in use in the County of Sussex* in 1875. This interest led also to the *Dictionary of the Kentish dialect and provincialisms*, with W. F. Shaw in 1886, and to at least 20 short pieces in *Notes and Queries* on further Sussex terms.⁶ He was an active member of the Sussex Archaeological Society and, although he never published in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, he edited for the society *Domesday Book in relation to the County of Sussex* (1887), joined its committee in 1886 and served as chairman from 1895 to 1903.

We cannot know why Parish took the decision to be ordained into the Church of England, and it may have been that his position as fifth son played a part in this but, in contrast to White, although



Fig. 2 (a). The Revd W. D. Parish in about 1863 (East Sussex Record Office, ACC 10569/1/113).



Fig. 2 (b). The Revd W. D. Parish in middle age (East Sussex Record Office, PAR 482/7/10/3).

he found time for his research, he seems to have been a committed parish clergyman. Things had changed in the Anglican Church since White's day, albeit slowly. Reform movements, both Evangelical and High Church, meant that over the course of the 19th century various abuses including non-residence were no longer tolerated. Parish's friend and neighbour, Edward Boys Ellman (1815–1906), Rector of Berwick from 1846, wrote memoirs giving an insight into clergy practices when he was ordained.⁷ He describes Holy Communion being celebrated only once a quarter in any church in the area, clergy playing whist on Sunday afternoons and hunting on weekdays, and Archdeacon Raynes of Lewes giving a dinner party one Ash Wednesday, having forgotten the significance of the day, and merely ordering pancakes as an extra dish when reminded.⁸ Ellman received no pastoral training at all during his curacy, for the vicar had never once set foot in the parish.

W. D. Parish, like Ellman, was a conscientious incumbent and found similar disarray when he was first inducted. He noted in his copy of White:

Degradation of Communion Vessels

When I first came to the Vicarage of Selmeston and Alciston, I found that the only preparation for the Holy Communion (which was administered four times a year) was that the Clerk carried the vessels and cloths in his ordinary labourer's dinner basket, and set down the basket and its contents in the corner of the Chancel for the Clergyman to arrange as he pleased⁹

He actively oversaw the restoration of Selmeston's parish church completed in 1867, a contentious act today, but one of many such modernisations of the time. In 1877 he was appointed Chancellor of Chichester Cathedral, nominally as a canon residentiary with the associated income, but with few responsibilities. He resigned in 1900.¹⁰

Having already acted as diocesan inspector of schools while at Firle, Parish became very involved in the work of the village school once he moved to Selmeston, overseeing its expansion. Following the 1870 Education Act he came to national prominence, opposing the extension of compulsory attendance to voluntary schools (as it was in 1880). His pamphlet *School attendance secured without compulsion, an account of a plan of school management adopted at Selmeston, Sussex*, was first published in 1871 and ran through five editions.¹¹ It was cited

in the House of Commons and circulated by the Education Department.

Parish visited America during the Civil War of 1861–5, and had planned to visit France during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1) but was dissuaded from the latter by his father. Both these events were mentioned by Ellman in the context that he had 'plenty of money, so when he took a holiday he could afford to go where he liked.'¹² Even so, he must have spent much time in and around Selmeston. The village lies just north of the present A27 which runs parallel with the South Coast, with the Channel port of Newhaven six miles distant.¹³ It is an ancient village, its parish priest being mentioned in the Domesday Book. The 1871 census tells us that it had a population of 206 in 53 families, while Alciston's population stood at 212 in 51 families. It was therefore a small community, and even allowing for the fact that by the mid-19th century such villages were no longer as remote as in White's day when roads were rough and often impassable, (nearby Berwick station had opened in 1846 on the railway line from Brighton to St Leonard's) Selmeston must sometimes have seemed a little lonely to a single man. Despite his other interests and friendships, Parish must occasionally have felt he had time on his hands.

When he acquired the 1877 edition of White, he was evidently taken by a suggestion in Frank Buckland's Preface:

There is hardly a parish in England or Wales where the clergyman has not opportunities more or less favourable for writing a local 'White's Selborne', taking White's method of observing and recording as a model of his note-book.¹⁴

Parish may already have compiled such notes. A few of the annotations predate the publication date of 1877, which suggests that another manuscript (and possibly an earlier edition of White) was in existence from which he copied observations. Many clergymen at this time were keen naturalists, among them his friend Ellman who produced his own nature notebooks and lists. But Parish admitted in his introductory notes to the volume that:

White's method of observing is not quite so easily taken as Mr Buckland seems to think; because the observations of White are those of an educated naturalist; and, with every desire to make this interleaved copy of White's Selborne my note book, for recording what I

observe of the habits of birds and animals, I know that many of my notes will prove how little I know; and if anyone should expect to find any instruction in them, he will be disappointed.

Yet I think that even annotated ignorance has a value of its own – so I will not be discouraged from what I have often thought of undertaking – and, having secured my interleaved copy, I will cram it as full of notes as my cramped writing can supply.¹⁵

Acknowledging his own failings, he makes the following suggestion:

I should like to catch a raw clergyman just come from some town to a country living, and persuade him to take one special branch of Natural History each year for five years – and read, and observe, and make notes, right or wrong, and correct them afterwards. How much he would know at the end of his five years apprenticeship!

I should allow him a little general study for the first year, which should be devoted to finding out all he could about his own domestic animals and birds – the fleas in his own bed, and the beetles on his own lawn – then I should introduce him to the gamekeeper, the shepherd, and the stockman, and recommend any boy to his particular friendship who should be preeminent among his fellows for a taste for birds nesting – and, with these to consult from time to time, he would soon find himself furnished with a good groundwork for his future studies, which would enable him to take into his own hand the management of his glebe his garden and his cows, and give him an inexhaustible source of interest in a life which might otherwise seem to be occasionally dull and devoid of pleasure.¹⁶

Parish blamed his own education for what he regarded as his poor level of observation, and might have gone on to quote the following passage in Buckland's Preface, since it chimes with his own view:

I feel assured that the education of children, both in towns and country, might be greatly forwarded if they were taught in the schools what and how to observe. Especially in the country should they be encouraged to make collections of common objects, animal, vegetable, and mineral. They should also be

taught to recognise indigenous British birds and beasts, and to send in notes as to what they have observed of their habits. Such studies tend to sharpen the natural faculties, while they humanise the intellect.¹⁷

By comparison, Parish tells us:

my early training was the very worst that could have been given to anyone who could hereafter wish to be instructed in the ways and works of Nature.

'Do not ask questions' was the rule of reply to every enquiry. 'Ask no questions and you will be told no lies', said my nurse. 'Little boys should be seen and not heard', said my Aunts. So there I was, cut off from the first steps to knowledge, and taught that an enquiring mind was one of the special characteristics of a naughty boy – perhaps I should have been a better boy if my thoughts had been encouraged to run in the wholesome channel to which they were naturally directed.

As for my school education, there were few opportunities of observing any other birds but London sparrows at Charterhouse, and though we used to hear the cattle complaining of the cruelty of their drovers in the neighbouring market of Smithfield, not a single animal, mad or otherwise, broke away from its tormentors and took refuge in our playground, during all the years I was at the school.

As regards my education in other subjects, it seems, now I look back to it, to have consisted of a series of attacks made upon me by learned men to find out what I did not know – and to flog or otherwise punish me for not knowing it. As for teaching me anything, in the way that I now see children taught in our national schools, no such thing was ever attempted ... I should like to disembowel all pedagogues.¹⁸

These criticisms surely explain why Parish was so actively interested in the small village school within his own parish and why he took such a pragmatic approach to education, seeking to introduce telegraphy into the curriculum, to provide employment for boys outside agriculture, while in religious education he was happy to omit portions of the catechism that were likely to cause offence to Nonconformist parents.¹⁹ In short, he was a great advocate of the national school system,

considering it frequently superior to the public school education he had endured, but in a letter to *The Times* of 26 February 1878 he criticised the Board of Education for imposing excessive administrative burdens on teachers and governors as a result of the 1876 Education Act, instead of concentrating on their primary role as educators:

A few years ago I was astonished to find that I was expected to fill up printed forms with upwards of 800 entries, previous to the visit of the inspector to our little school of 72 children. Today I have notice of inspection for the same number of children, on whose behalf I am to make no less than 2,247 entries, many of which involve intricate calculations, and all of which must be verified by reference to four or five different books. All this is done to satisfy the stupid demands of the Parliamentary Pharisees and Scribes of the Education-Office, who increase our burdens day by day²⁰

To return to the annotated copy of White: after his criticism of educational systems, Parish began his notes and observations. As we have seen, he was aware of his limitations as a naturalist, and indeed his notes do not compare in detail with those of White.²¹ It is interesting, as a study of reading practices, that he does not attempt to create his own record of the natural history of Selmeaton from scratch. Rather, he uses this edition of White as a palimpsest on which to work. Parish's usual habit is to take an observation from White, for example his description of 'Raven Tree' where a pair of ravens had nested for several years until the tree was felled with the female still sitting on her nest.²² Parish's note on the facing blank leaf reads:

A pair of ravens built at Firle in 1894 in the trees at Overhill Lodge between Blackcap and the Front Hill, but the Keeper destroyed the nest.

In his small, neat hand, he gives each entry a heading ('Ravens'; 'Swallows', and so on) and carefully dates his note. His observations vary in length, and are often chatty in style, almost as if he were speaking to us, and they give an insight into country life at that time, describing also Parish's conversations with his parishioners who knew of his interests and brought incidents to his attention. Richard Jefferies, the well-known Victorian English nature writer, quoted by Mabey, regretted that Gilbert White paid such scant attention to his parishioners in his writings and 'did not leave a natural history of the people of

his day.'²³ The same cannot be said of Parish, who was a very sociable man who included encounters with others in his notes.

Sometimes Parish's annotations refer only tangentially to White's letters. Letter VIII (p. 21) briefly mentions a covert frequented by foxes, opposite which Parish wrote:

Fox taking lamb

1880 4th April

After Church at Alciston the shepherd brought along a fine fat lamb which has [been] killed by a fox; for the head was quite eaten off. He said that he had lost some other lambs this season in the same way. I was not aware that a fox would carry off a lamb – especially one so large – but I was told that it is not at all an uncommon thing.²⁴

Parish's parishioners often brought him specimens to identify. Opposite White's reference to three grosbeaks which appeared in his fields in the winter (one of which he shot), Parish tells us that on 22 January 1881:

While the snow still lies deep on the ground after the great storm of Jan'y 18th Willm Turner brings me a bird which he has caught. The oldest men fail to recognise it, and it is even suggested that it may be 'something of a parrot'. It turns out to be a Hawfinch [or grosbeak] – which is a rare bird here, though it breeds at Ninfield, and no doubt in other places in Sussex.

All accounts of the hawfinch describe it as a very shy bird – there was no shyness about this specimen: he went at everyone within reach, without waiting to be attacked or disturbed; he bit the boy, and bit the housemaid – not pecking them, but holding them fast. When we put him into a large cage he adapted himself to the situation, and hopped about as cheerfully as if he had lived there all his life. The next day he was quite tame and took food out of our hands. But after two or three days he pined and died. We did not let him out or he would certainly have been frozen [Fig. 3].²⁵

This lively account includes the vicarage servants and indicates that they were, perhaps not always so willingly, involved in Parish's interests.²⁶ He always writes affectionately of his parishioners, but was surprised by their ignorance of the wildlife around them:

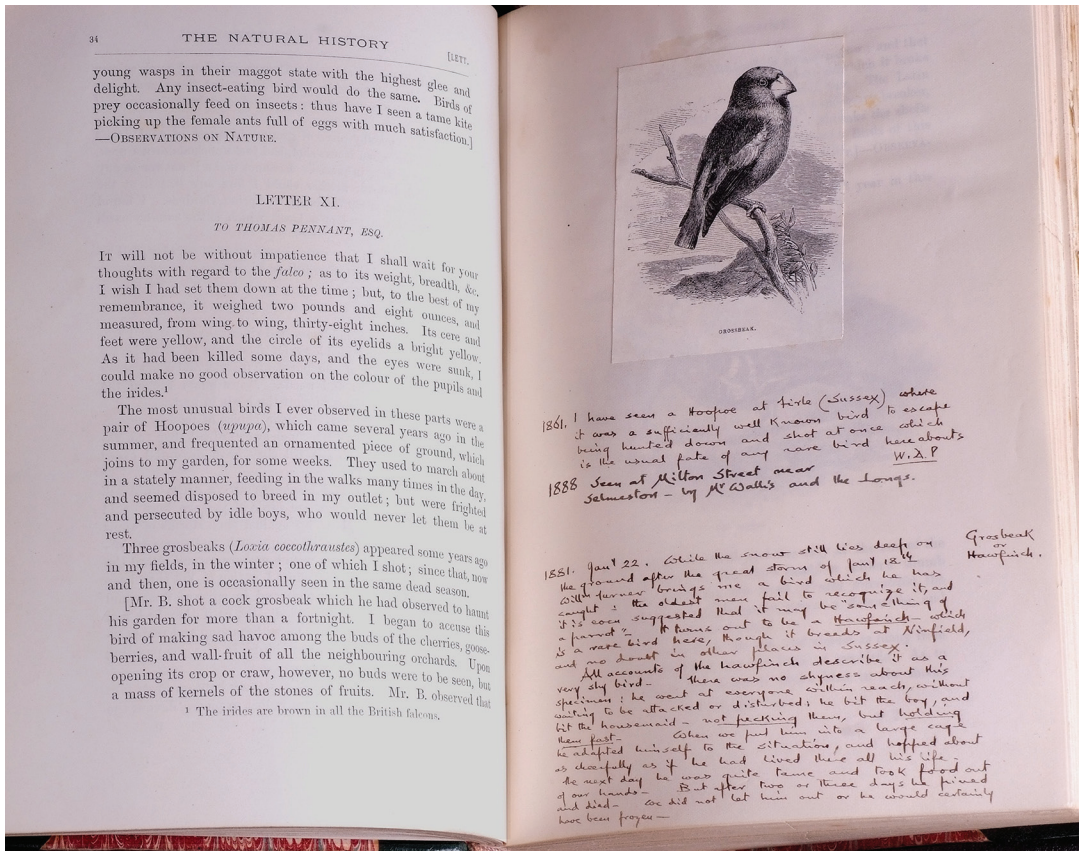


Fig. 3. Parish's notes about and illustration of the Grosbeak or Hawfinch.

I try to learn something of the ways & names of birds but it is not easy – for the country folk are surprisingly ignorant of nat hist and if one asks them the name of all but the commonest bird an answer is out of the question.

A farm bailiff brought me a cocoon as an extraordinary treasure last year, he had never seen such a thing before. He was profoundly astonished at the explanation of it – yet this is a more than unusually intelligent man – at least he has read Josephus all through which after all may be a proof of his profundity or it may have addled his brain.

My housek[eaper] & housem[aid] who have lived all their lives in the country were frightened out of their wits by a grasshopper which got under the Hall Table – they exclaimed aloud & declared that they thought one of my dried scorpions had got loose!²⁷

One can imagine him telling these stories to his clergy colleagues, relishing the humour in the situation. His affability was legendary. Parish features regularly in the diaries of William Parry Crawley (1842–1907), incumbent of the nearby parishes of Firle and Beddingham.²⁸ These diary entries are concise and factual and, with a few exceptions relating to the death of his first wife Mary, and marriage to Margaret, his second wife, do not extend to personal feelings. Nevertheless the references to the regular visits that he and his family paid to Parish, and to the occasions when they dined together, add to our picture of Parish's social contacts at that time and also reveal his ability to get on well with young people. A typical entry is from 8 September 1890, when 'the 4 children and I walked over to Selmeston, according to promise, to see Parish. He showed them his shells &c. & walked back with us part of the way.'²⁹ There are also a number

of references to the Crawley children visiting the Selmeaton vicarage without their parents.

Ellman described him as ‘one of the most genial of men – who possessed an ever-ready fund of humour He has always been a favourite with all classes, an amusing conversationalist, as all his friends know well.’³⁰ He mentions trying to persuade Parish to contribute to the Clergy Widows’ Fund for the Lewes Archdeaconry. Parish refused on the ground that he had already helped the Society by not marrying!

One of his flights of fancy comes at the end of the following observation of young rooks learning to fly:

Young Rooks 13. May 1894

I have been watching the young rooks receiving their first lessons in flying. Some clung to the nest, while the old birds tried to beat them off, they were evidently crying in terror and seemed to say Oh don’t Oh don’t. Oh don’t.

When they once were sent off, clear of the trees, the difficulty was to get back again. They had to go where the wind blew them, and to alight on the right tree was hard work. When they mistook the home-nest, they met with a very unsympathetic reception from the rightful occupants. They exhibited no discretion: and made terrible errors as to the power of slight branches to sustain them. I saw two clinging to each other on a very slender twig. It seemed extremely ridiculous, till it occurred to me that the people who get to be angels will have to encounter serious difficulties during their first day in wings.³¹

Parish was interested in all aspects of Sussex country life. His introduction to *A dictionary of the Sussex dialect* indicates his respect for the language of the working people whom he considered spoke ‘purer specimens of the English language’ than the educated man, because their language reflected more clearly the history of the county in which it was used.³² He was also fascinated by their folklore, illogical though it might appear:

In East Sussex the cuckoo is supposed to appear on 14th April when it is believed that an old woman takes one in a sack to Heathfield fair and there lets it out.

To hear the Sussex folk talk of it one would be inclined to think that there is only one

cuckoo: they say, ‘I’ve heerd ‘un- she’ve let him out at last.’

If the Cuckoo does not appear at the expected time it is supposed that the old woman is out of temper.

Heathfield fair is commonly called Cuckoo fair [Fig. 4].³³

When White writes about cuckoos feeding on dragonflies (p. 112), Parish makes the following note:

Cuckoo’s food

The children say that the cuckoos come in the spring and eat up all the dirt which has accumulated in the winter.

When the children wish to go on inconvenient expeditions in winter time, they are told they must wait till the cuckoo comes and cleans the road .

In his notes to White’s *Natural history*, Buckland lists several examples of country people swallowing toads to cure cancer, or sucking a live frog to cure thrush. This reminded Parish of a story he was told:

Frog used as a medicine.

Mrs Douglas of Ashling in the Parish of Funtington near Chichester, tells me that a very respectable old labouring man there named Eames, who had just died of the English Cholera after two days illness (Sept. 1880), has been in the habit of swallowing a small live frog every spring and fall, for many years, saying that it destroys all the humours of the stomach, and attributing to this remedy the singular immunity from all diseases which he enjoyed for many years.³⁴

Whether its inhabitants swallowed frogs or not, Selmeaton seems to have been a healthy environment. In 1881 he noted under “Longevity of agricultural labourers”:

June 1st 1881 This evening I met an old man and his great-grandson going home from their work together. The man (Richd Fears of Alciston) is 86 years old – the boy James West -13. In Selmeaton old John Guy who is 88 does as good a days work as he ever did.³⁵

At the very end of the volume following the index we read that:

In the village of Selmeaton Sussex ... during the years 1884 to 1889 there were six deaths of inhabitants whose ages amounted to 501 years giving an average of 83 years 6 month The only other deaths which occurred during

Cuckoo

I observed a Cuckoo at Selmeston as late
as 30th August 1875-

In East Sussex the Cuckoo is supposed
to appear on 14th April when it is believed
that an old woman takes one in a sack
to Healthfield fair and there lets it out -
to hear the Sussex folk talk of it one
would be inclined to think that there
is only one Cuckoo - they say - "I've heard
in - she've let him out at last"

If the Cuckoo does not appear at the
expected time it is supposed that the
old woman is out of temper -
Healthfield fair is commonly called
Cuckoo fair -

in 1881. The Cuckoo was heard at
Selmeston on "his own day" - but a bitter
North East Wind set in, and he was heard
no more for several days.

Fig. 4. Parish's notes on the cuckoo.

this period were those of two strangers, each of whom died in consequence of drink.

He then lists the names and ages of the six parishioners.

Gilbert White wrote at length about swallows. While his contemporaries believed that they hibernated in winter, White considered the possibility of migration but was unable to prove either theory. Parish was also interested in this topic and regularly notes the dates of the appearance of these birds. In successive years he charted their arrival and departure dates, also their temporary departures during periods of adverse weather, after which they re-congregated around Selmeston church. He writes of 'large congregations' of these birds, no doubt more numerous than today. 'The

swallows often attack my cats and drive them away' he writes in 1894.³⁶

Parish's notes include several such stories of wildlife interacting with domestic animals. In response to White's list of the birds to be found upon Wolmer Pond, 'a vast lake for this part of the world, containing, in its whole circumference, 2,646 yards,'³⁷ Parish queries an omission in White's account, and then continues:

I am surprised that White does not mention that charming little bird the Moor-hen - these birds are to be found in great numbers in Sussex wherever water and sedge and reeds abound - they are generally supposed to be shy and timid - but where they are undisturbed, they soon lose their shyness.

Several nests may be found every spring, within ten yards of Sherrington Manor House in this Parish.

The young birds made friends with young ducks, so far as to enter the coops and eat their food; but the old birds killed several young ducks and pecked them to pieces – soon afterwards, they became bolder still, and attacked the geese; perching on their backs and pecking them till they drove them off the pond. I have also seen one of these timid birds attack a cat, and drive it from the neighbourhood of her nest.

A note on the starling's ability to mimic other animals elicits the observation:

I keep 4 cats; and numbers of starlings breed about my premises: I have heard them imitate the mewling of the cats so exactly, that I have been frequently taken in – and have wasted many precious minutes in looking and calling for my cats.³⁸

One interaction between wildlife and domestic birds appears to have resulted in a hybrid:

I had some decided hybrids here between a fowl and a duck. An old Dorking cock deserted his natural wife's society, and associated himself with the ducks³⁹

The resulting offspring aroused interest. One was exhibited on the Pier at Brighton, while Lady Caroline Maxse bought another for £5. Dr Günther of the British Museum placed a specimen among his exhibits in the museum, but the Council of the Zoological Society doubted that they were really true hybrids (Fig. 5).

Anyone who knows their Gilbert White will know of his interest in tortoises, in particular his own pet, Timothy, which belonged originally to friends in Ringmer, only seven miles from Selmeston, and was eventually given to him around 1780. On reading of it, Parish recalls a letter from a correspondent in Penzance referring to 'a tortoise, reputed to be one hundred years old'. Parish remarks:

I fancy that a hundred years is considered a convenient age in anecdotes of this class, which always reminds me of the old story of the gentleman who was so much surprised to hear that crows would live a hundred years, that he bought one, and kept it in a cage, in order to see for himself whether this story of longevity was true or not.⁴⁰

Besides recording his observations of wildlife, Parish also noted unusual weather conditions. During a mild Christmas in 1880:

I threw open my study window to its full width & let out my fire. In the afternoon I found large quantities of May weed in full flower – in the evening I read in the E Sussex News of the day that a gallon of mushrooms had been gathered on the Downs at Alciston. On the day following Christmas, a beautiful strawberry bloom was brought to me from Mr Madgwick's garden.⁴¹

Snow storms were relatively common at that time, one occurring in October 1880 while the trees were still in full leaf. 'The great snow storm' of 1881 where the snow blew from the north-east for 18 hours without respite, resulted in drifts twelve feet high, all the able-bodied men being occupied in clearing a passage through the roads. The old people 'said they had not seen such drifts since 1836, when the avalanche fell at Lewes and destroyed several houses and many of their inmates.'⁴² This reminded Parish of a time in May 1849 when his brother-in-law the Revd Thomas Hubbard was moving into the Rectory at Fairlight (a village near Hastings) 'and the vans containing his furniture were left all night in a snow drift near the Hare and Hounds Inn.' By contrast with this, May 1889 was unbearably hot, following a bitter winter and spring, but there ensued a sharp reversal of temperature on 10 June resulting in the death from cold of many newly-shorn sheep. This pattern of a contemporary observation leading to a recollection of a time earlier in the century occurs often in Parish's notes.

In addition to his own observations, Parish pasted in newspaper cuttings that caught his eye, such as one referring to 'Railway Jack':

A very interesting, intelligent, and well-known traveller on the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway met with a bad accident on Thursday week, at the Norwood Junction Station. The dog, called 'Railway Jack', was caught by a passing train as he was crossing the line, and had one of his fore legs badly injured. Jack has for some years been in the habit of travelling up and down the ... railway between Lewes and London⁴³

Parish cut letters from *The Times* on observations of swifts. One from Thomas Paine of Dorking, actually makes reference to Gilbert White: 'White

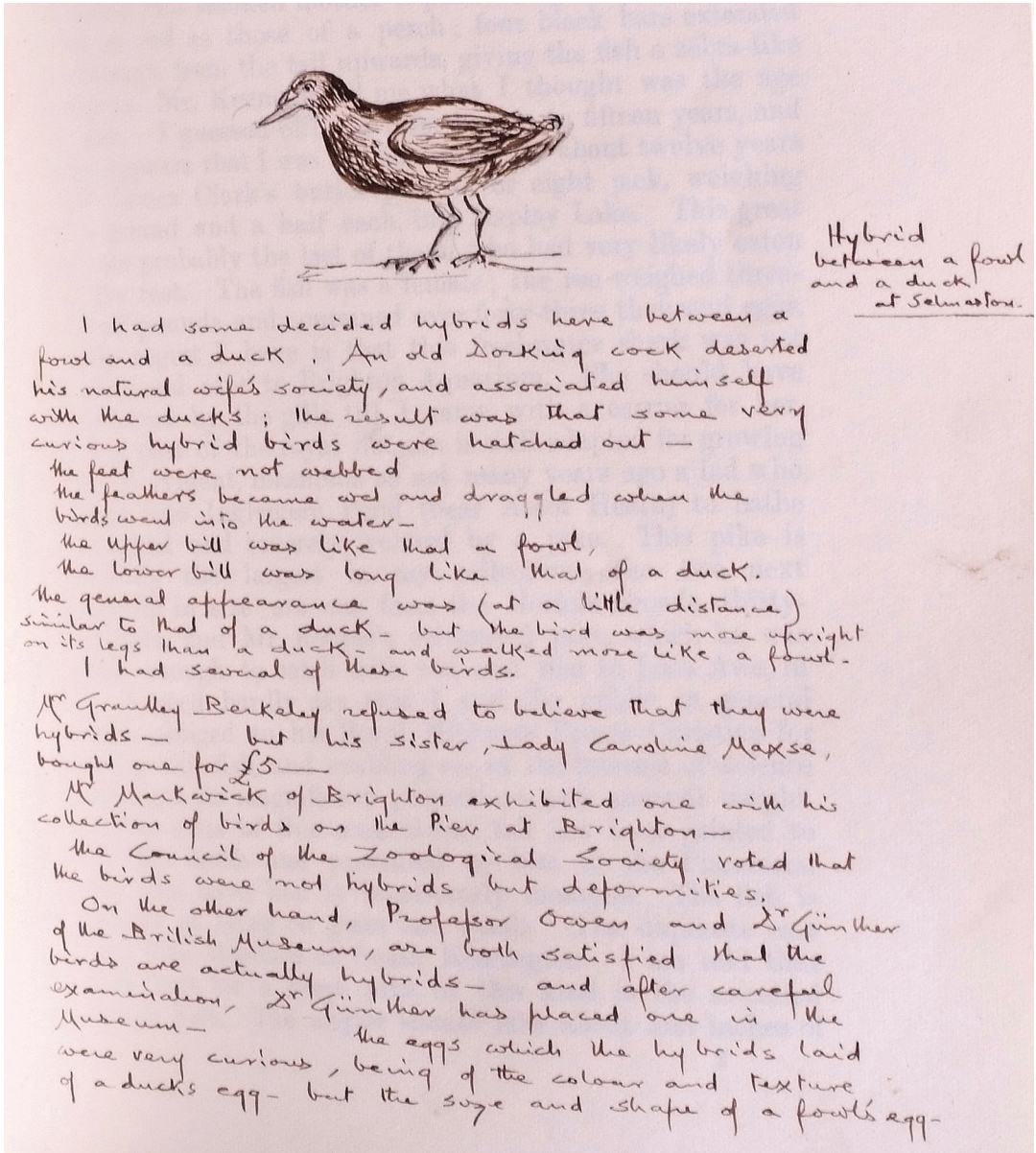


Fig. 5. The Selmeston hybrid: a cross between a fowl and a duck.

of Selborne gives in his Calendar the 31st July as the earliest day of their departure....' (Fig. 6).⁴⁴

Other cuttings are from national and local newspapers and cover such topics as unusual weather conditions, sightings of wildlife and methods of destroying wasps' nests by the use of cyanide of potassium which, as Parish notes, 'is

such a deadly poison that if a little of it got into a sore place on the hand of the operator he might be found dead next day among the wasps.' One cutting is a report of the death of the zoologist Thomas Bell in 1880. Bell was an early White scholar who bought The Wakes in Selborne in 1860. A portrait of Daines Barrington is inserted: White's letters to

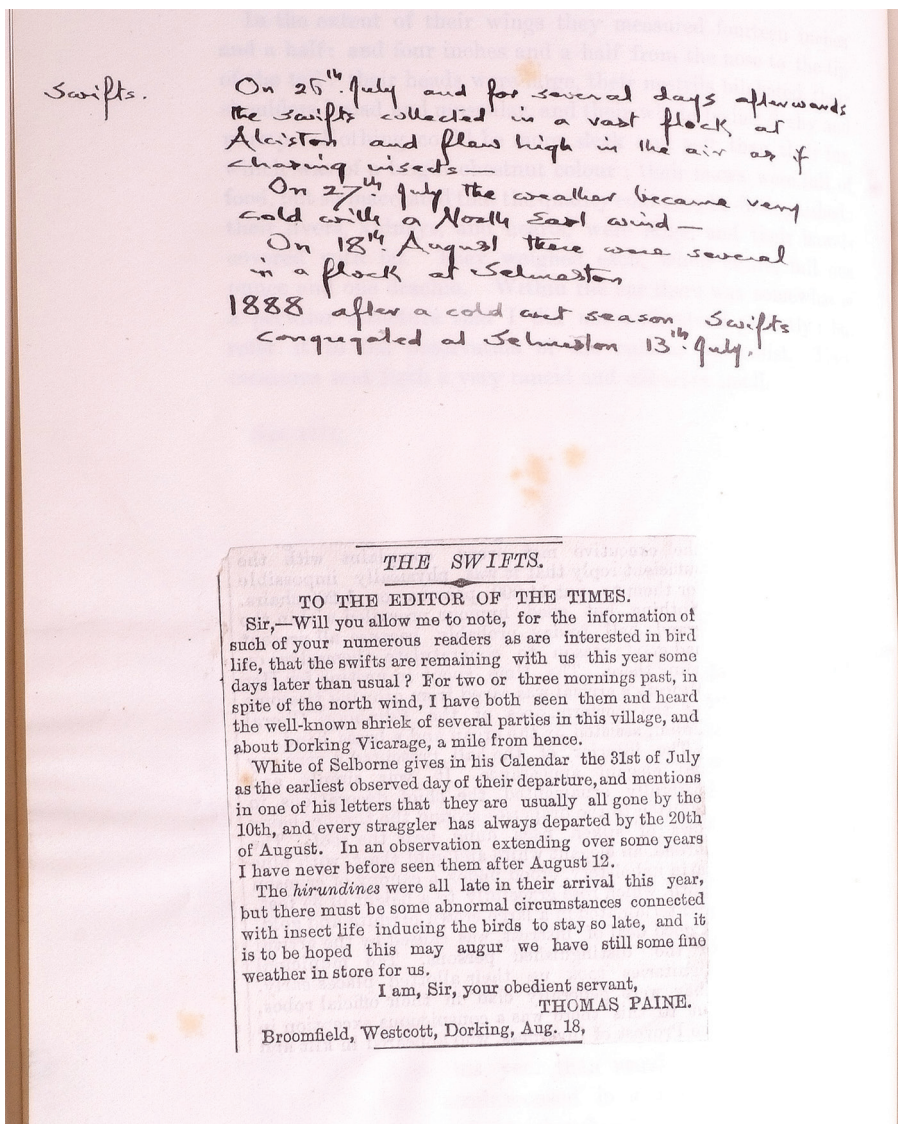


Fig. 6. Parish's notes on swifts at Selmeaton, with a cutting from *The Times* on the same subject.

Barrington form a large part of his *Natural history*. One cutting from *Notes and Queries* (7 September 1895) is a contribution by Parish to an earlier list of collective nouns for sporting birds. He had added sixteen additional names to the original list, including 'a suit, sore, or word of mallards', 'a wing or congregation of plover or rooks', and 'a trip of widgeon'.

Parish never married, and his will, dated February 1895, had stipulated that all his goods,

including his books, should be sold at auction, and his estate left to his family, friends, servants and certain parishioners.⁴⁵ He died of Bright's disease on 23 September 1904. His obituary in the *Sussex Daily News* tells us that he 'had always expressed a desire to die in his study, with his books around him ... his bed was taken downstairs into the study and there he passed away.'⁴⁶ Probate was granted on 25 October, his estate being valued at a substantial £6365 9s. As Phelps sent the annotated copy of

White to Charterhouse in March 1905, no time appears to have been wasted in selling Parish's belongings. We do not know which bookseller bought White's *Natural history*, but whoever it was must have considered that, bearing in mind Parish's reputation as a local antiquarian and well-loved clergyman, it would be of interest to his customers. The two volumes were priced at 21s. the pair. It is rather ironic that they found their way quite so quickly to Charterhouse, the school of which he wrote:

I know how careful my instructors were to keep to themselves the mystic tricks of Latin prose and verse composition ... when one peep at the machinery behind the curtains would have made us better scholars than themselves – in a very short time – that was the very thing they were afraid of.⁴⁷

W. D. Parish's natural history notes may not hold the same scientific interest as those of Gilbert White, although a contemporary local natural historian would, I am sure, find it rewarding to compare them with observations from today, particularly bearing in mind the effects of climate change and changes in agricultural practice over the past century. Local historians would note also how much detail of everyday country life can be read into these relatively short notes. Parish lived at a transitional time when he was able to record a way of life which, in its customs and dialect, had not changed for centuries, and yet was also a period of modernity and change. We would certainly find ourselves far more at home in late 19th-century Selmeston than in isolated 18th-century Selborne, where the state of the roads was poor and short journeys

uncomfortable and protracted. But Parish clearly identified with the earlier country clergyman, and from the perspective of the book historian, these volumes represent a fascinating example of how detailed reading of one text can affect the reader and lead to direct intervention on the page. Parish took up Buckland's challenge to 'write a local "White's Selborne," taking White's method of observing and recording as a model for his note-book.'⁴⁸ But it is not just a model. He wrote his notes *within* his own copy of the book, thus making direct reference to White: when White notes the presence of snow-buntings, so does Parish. The annotations are generally chatty and brief, sometimes humorous. But they are not haphazard: Parish went to the trouble of writing an introduction providing a *raison d'être* for his work, and an index to his notes facing that of the printed edition and using broadly the same terms (for example, *Auk, great, value of egg* or *Bat in Hamble Church*). He includes a detailed list of 'Birds which I have seen at Selmeston', providing the local names of some. He was a scholarly man, which perhaps explains this, but one wonders also whether he had a readership in mind. If so, it is sad that the books were sold so soon after his death and were denied more exposure. Tangible records of reading are relatively infrequent, but here is one, carefully committed to paper, a homage to a great naturalist, but also an act of affection for a small Sussex village.

Acknowledgements

The photographs of Parish's copy of White's *Selborne* are reproduced by kind permission of the Headmaster and Governors of Charterhouse. Figures 2 (a) and (b) are reproduced by kind permission of the County Archivist, East Sussex Record Office.

Author: Felicity Stimpson, 153 Surrenden Rd, Brighton, BN1 6ZA; felicity.stimpson@nationaltrust.org.uk.

NOTES

¹ R. Mabey, Gilbert White (London: Dent, 1993), *passim*, quoted passage at 188.

² C. Parish, 'Parish, Sir Woodbine (1796–1882)', rev. M. Deas, *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/21269, accessed 24 March 2016].

³ R.L. Arrowsmith, *Charterhouse Register, 1769–1872* (London: Phillimore, 1974), 282. On Parish generally, see P. Lucas, 'Parish, William Douglas (1833–1904)', rev. J. D. Haigh, *Oxford dictionary of national biography* [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35380, accessed 15 April 2016]; *Sussex Express*, 1 Oct. 1904; *Sussex Archaeological*

Collections **47** (1904), 163–4; *Chichester Diocesan Gazette* (1904), 116–7; Parish's obituary in *Sussex Daily News*, 23 Sep. 1904 (which stressed that his enthusiasm for cricket was lifelong).

⁴ Arrowsmith, ix.

⁵ J. A. Vickers (ed.), *The Religious Census of Sussex 1851*, Sussex Record Society **75** (1989), 87.

⁶ W. D. Parish, *A dictionary of the Sussex dialect and collection of provincialisms in use in the County of Sussex* (Lewes: Farncombe & Co., 1875). R. Coates, *The traditional dialect of Sussex. A historical guide, description, selected texts, bibliography and discography* (Lewes: Pomegranate Press, 2010), 34, 235–6, 238, 245, 247, 268–9, 298. J. Roper, 'Sussex glossarists and their illustrative quotations', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, **145** (2007), 181–94.

In this article Roper draws the reader's attention to the ambivalent attitude of Parish towards his subject, viewing the Sussex dialect as both worthy of study and a direct link to an earlier form of English, but also as a source of humour. Roper also sees in this work a less rigorous approach to linguistics than some of his fellow glossarists, but Parish did not necessarily see himself as an academic in this instance, as his final paragraph in the Preface to his *Dictionary* shows: 'Such a work must of necessity be tentative and imperfect, but such as it is I offer it to the kind perusal of all who are interested in the old-world ideas and language of our kind-hearted old-fashioned Sussex folk, many of whom I number among my dearest friends.'

⁷ E. B. Ellman, *Recollections of a Sussex parson, with a memoir by his daughter, Maude Walker* (1912; repr. Berwick: St. Michael and All Angels, 2006).

⁸ Ellman, 43, 44.

⁹ Facing p. 471 of Parish's own copy of White's *Natural history and antiquities of Selborne* (London: Macmillan, 1877), henceforward cited as 'White'. All quotations from W. D. Parish's annotations are cited in relation to the printed page they face, or in some instances, on which they are written directly.

¹⁰ *Sussex Express*, 12 Oct. 1867, 11 Dec. 1877.

¹¹ Published in Lewes by Farncombe, 1871–5. West Sussex Record Office, E/188/8/3. *The Times*, 14 May 1872, 9 Oct. 1873, 2 Jul. 1874, 26 Feb. 1878 and (appearing before the Royal Commission on the Working of the Elementary Education Acts) 14 Jan. 1887.

¹² Ellman, 201.

¹³ Parish mentions hearing the distinct 'rattle of the steam crane on the quay at Newhaven 6 1/2 miles' and '(before rain) the sound of the Newhaven trains.' From his house he could also hear the fog horns of the steamers in the Channel (White, facing p. 242).

¹⁴ White, xi.

¹⁵ Facing vii.

¹⁶ Facing viii.

¹⁷ White, xi-xii.

¹⁸ White, xi-xii.

¹⁹ J. Hirst Hollowell, *Royal Commission on Education, 1886–7: an examination of its statements & recommendations* (London: James Clarke, 1887), 89.

²⁰ This letter reached a larger circulation when it was reprinted in the *Journal of the Society of Arts* on 22 March 1878, p. 372.

²¹ Of course White was writing to a correspondent, and in some cases directly for publication and his work was

therefore more polished and detailed. Mabey's biography details the work's publication history.

²² White, 6.

²³ G. White, *The natural history of Selborne*, ed. by R. Mabey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), xx.

²⁴ Facing 21.

²⁵ Facing 34.

²⁶ See Roper, 186–7, for more details of Parish's household.

²⁷ Written on a loose leaf laid in at end of volume.

²⁸ Crawley's diaries, which he began in 1878 when he moved to Firlie, are at West Sussex Record Office, Acc. 17312.

²⁹ Parish had a large collection of natural history objects and other artefacts, some ninety of the latter being donated to the British Museum (see <http://collection.britishmuseum.org/resource?uri=http%3A%2F%2Fcollection.britishmuseum.org%2Fid%2Fperson-institution%2F126980>). One of the birds in his

collections was sent to him by a brother and arrived in a dilapidated state. Parish re-mounted the head and legs and the eccentric resulting object is said to have served as the model for Tenniel's borogrove in Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, Carroll being an old friend of Parish (*Sussex Daily News*, 24 Sep. 1904).

³⁰ Ellman, 201. Parish's obituary (*Sussex Daily News*, 24 Sep. 1904) also stresses the 'magic spell [that] seems to bind Vicar and people together. He loved each one of them and they loved him. He kept a record of all their birthdays ...'

³¹ Facing 155.

³² Parish, *Dictionary*, 1.

³³ Facing 96.

³⁴ Facing 358.

³⁵ Facing 478.

³⁶ Facing 155.

³⁷ White, 23.

³⁸ Facing 416

³⁹ Facing 336.

⁴⁰ Facing 114.

⁴¹ Foot of 574.

⁴² Facing 277.

⁴³ Following half-title.

⁴⁴ Facing 131.

⁴⁵ East Sussex Record Office, AMS 1015.

⁴⁶ According to the same obituary, he 'possessed probably the finest collection of books in the diocese.' So far, I have been unable to discover a probate list or catalogue of this library.

⁴⁷ Facing vii.

⁴⁸ White, xi.