

GATHORNE CRANBROOK, FIRST CHAIRMAN OF ENGLISH NATURE: A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

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ABSTRACT. — Gathorne, 5th Earl of Cranbrook, was the first Chairman of the conservation agency English Nature. Some personal recollections and reflections are offered of his time in office, touching on the administration, scientific programme and staff relationships in the organisation.

KEY WORDS. — conservation, Cranbrook, English Nature, Nature Conservancy

INTRODUCTION

This is a personal reflection of the nine year period in which I worked closely with Gathorne Cranbrook. From mid-1990 until March 1998 he was the first Chairman of English Nature. He led the selection panel which appointed me as the first Chief Executive of English Nature in the summer of 1990. This appointment, from 1990–2000, proved to be the most rewarding and exciting executive appointment that I have ever had. The excellent working relationship that I enjoyed with Gathorne did much to contribute to the success of English Nature, setting its direction over the 16-year period of its existence.

Let me begin with a little history, especially for readers unfamiliar with government sponsored nature conservation in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. During the latter part of the Second World War, a distinguished group of men produced a report setting out what should be done for the conservation of nature in the post-war period. At a time of great national hardship, and the War far from concluded, the far-sightedness of these individuals was extraordinary. Their report is beautifully written and is recommended reading for anyone interested in nature conservation in Great Britain. The report eventually led to the birth of the Nature Conservancy which was reconstituted, with slightly different duties, in 1973 as the Nature Conservancy Council (an organisation covering the whole of Great Britain). The Nature Conservancy Council flourished in the 1980s under the Thatcher administration when its staff numbers doubled and the budget more than doubled.

In 1989 the Government announced a change to the way nature and countryside conservation in Great Britain would be

organised, a decision which surprised the nature conservation movement. The existing organisations involved were:

- The Nature Conservancy Council, which covered Great Britain
- The Countryside Commission, which covered England and Wales
- The Countryside Commission for Scotland

There had been simmering political tensions in Wales and Scotland in the late 1980s, and a greater devolution of powers to the departments responsible for Scotland and Wales had been much talked about. Nevertheless the announcement of organisational change came as a shock to both the statutory and voluntary nature conservation organisations. It was supported by many and hotly disputed by others. The eventual outcome produced four new organisations, English Nature, the Countryside Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales, plus a coordinating committee called the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, which was the first ever official United Kingdom nature conservation body as it included Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Nicholas Ridley MP, did not combine the functions of the Countryside Commission and English Nature in England because “....of the much greater density of population and consequent pressure upon the land (in England)....”. It seemed an odd decision to many, and led to much scepticism about the real reasons behind the reorganisation. Sixteen years later (2006) both English Nature and the Countryside Agency disappeared into a new agency called Natural England.

A focus of the debate amongst parliamentarians about the changes was the science base of the Nature Conservancy Council, which was strong and widely respected. Especially in the House of Lords, where the Earl of Cranbrook was a

member, there were doubts as to whether a “fragmented body” could retain the necessary standards and expertise for Great Britain and retain a strong United Kingdom contribution to international conservation matters. The Earl of Cranbrook was a member of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology. Indeed, appearing before that committee as a witness had earlier led to my first meeting with him. During the 1989–1990 session the Committee conducted an enquiry into the Nature Conservancy Council which focussed on the needs for a strong scientific base to support nature conservation practice at local, national and international levels. Gathorne Cranbrook took a typically cerebral and low key approach to the proceedings, analysing carefully all the contributions to the enquiry.

I thus knew well both the scientific reputation and interests of Gathorne when the Secretary of State for the Environment announced in 1990 that he was to be the first Chairman of the new English body called, in the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA 1990), the Nature Conservancy Council for England (soon after called English Nature). Until 1 April 1991, the new organisation existed as a “shadow body”. So Gathorne became the first, and initially the only, person appointed to the new organisation. If he felt lonely, no one ever knew! He oversaw the competition to appoint the Chief Executive, and he offered me the job, and so now there were two! The reality was slightly more complex, as some members of the existing Nature Conservancy Council were given roles to support the two of us as we prepared for the new organisation to be born in April 1991.

I am sure it will cause no one any surprise when I say that the first major battle with Government was over the size of the initial budget. As we discussed matters with Ministers and officials, I saw for the first time the steely resolve of Gathorne. Like me, he was determined that the new organisation should start life with positive momentum and a vigorous agenda. This determination and his exquisite politeness are two of the most lasting characteristics for which English Nature has much to thank Gathorne.

The other big decision which Gathorne was asked to take before April 1991 was the choice of a new name and logo for the organisation called Nature Conservancy Council for England in the EPA 1990. Of course, he protested that the name should surely be chosen by a group, part of his natural inclination to involve those with whom he was working. The advice I had received, which from previous experience I thoroughly endorsed, was that one person should make the final decision. Before accepting the report from the designer we had commissioned, I received a series of sketches from Gathorne with his ideas, mostly around the flag of St. George. As was his way, he did not insist that these were immediately adopted but agreed to wait for the designer to report. The shadow Board of Directors, which had been appointed by late 1990, had a brain-storming session with the designer and agreed three options to present to Gathorne. This we duly did, and the name English Nature and its logo were chosen by Gathorne early in 1991.

Gathorne and I shared many ideas about our vision for the style and actions which English Nature should develop. As we drew up our first operational plan together we debated the culture and direction that we wanted the organisation to take. We came to a common view for our nature conservation agenda which can be summarised in a few short statements:

- We needed to treat those who owned the most special places for wildlife as customers, and seek their commitment to wildlife conservation.
- We wanted the quality of our Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) for wildlife to be much better within ten years, and an end to a compensation culture which rewarded owners for not damaging their SSSIs.
- We wanted special projects to improve the status and safety of some of our rarest species.
- We wanted to welcome more people to our National Nature Reserves so that they could experience the best of England’s wildlife.
- We wanted a new attitude towards the sites of geological interest including their importance for wildlife and landscape.
- We needed to compile evidence and then argue strongly for changes in Government policy toward the natural world.

This was a big agenda and, with the enthusiastic support of English Nature’s Council and staff, much was subsequently achieved. The outcome was to improve the quality and quantity of wildlife in England in the next decade. The record of what English Nature achieved under Gathorne Cranbrook’s chairmanship is chronicled in English Nature’s Annual Reports and elsewhere and the detail need not be repeated here.

Let me outline some examples of what English Nature achieved working to this agenda. We sought, and achieved, more personal contact between SSSI owners and our own staff. Face to face meetings and interactive discussion were encouraged so that the needs of wildlife and the SSSI owners were met. We aided this by introducing the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme whereby land managers were rewarded financially for actions which led to sustained improvements in the wildlife value of a site. This was enthusiastically taken up by SSSI owners and saw the end of a culture of compensation. It was developed and improved throughout the whole 16 years of English Nature’s existence before being absorbed into less focussed agricultural schemes.

English Nature’s Species Recovery Programme, begun in 1991, was the forerunner of much of the species programme of the UK Biodiversity Plan, published in 1995. Based originally on some work done in the dying days of the Nature Conservancy Council, the Species Recovery Programme took a single species, identified its needs as derived from ecological and management studies, and then funded programmes of direct action. It began with six species and soon expanded to over 30 including the reintroduction of Red Kites *Milvus milvus* which had become extinct in England. The programme has been very successful, and there are now more than 1,000

pairs of these birds in England. Two other species which have improved their status are the Fen Raft Spider *Dolomedes plantarius* (Clerk) and the Plymouth Pear *Pyrus cordata* Desv. Following the Convention on Biological Diversity signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the UK Biodiversity Plan was published in 1994. In mid-1995 the UK's Species and Habitat Action Plans were published which incorporated the English Nature programme.

A third major programme concerned National Nature Reserves (NNRs) inherited from the Nature Conservancy Council. We felt there were too few, they were too small and they did not welcome visitors effectively so we began a programme to put new, welcoming and informative signs on all our NNRs and set about seeking to increase the size of NNRs wherever possible. Within a decade the number of NNRs had increased from 135 to 200 and the total area increased by more than 50%.

So, let me say a little about how Gathorne projected his personality in to English Nature. For me as Chief Executive, he made conducting business very straightforward. He had a clear understanding of the executive's responsibilities and those of the non-executive Council he led. He had a natural understanding for this "boundary" which made my job as Chief Executive immeasurably easier. It induced in staff a confidence to act in the best interest of English Nature's statutory duties and to discuss freely and openly the challenges we faced. Early in his tenure many staff feared he might be rather "stiff" to deal with. I think many expected someone more stern and bombastic, whereas he had a natural reserve and warmth. Soon, those who came to know him gained an enormous respect for Gathorne as a man, as someone committed to the natural world and as leader of the organisation.

Nothing gave Gathorne greater pleasure than being out and about all over England, visiting wonderful places for wildlife and debating with staff how we might do more to improve habitats further. As you might imagine, English Nature staff really enjoyed these visits. He never came expecting red carpets and otiose greetings, but as a person fascinated by the natural world, and keen to share ideas with others who shared his passion. One of the few instructions he gave caused staff some amusement. He tired of carrying wellington boots around the country as he almost always travelled by train. So the order went out for a "Chairman's pair" to be kept in all twenty five English Nature offices. They were duly purchased and looked after!

He was a good Chairman of the governing Council. He always ensured all views were heard and responded robustly if he disagreed. He supported the involvement of Council members with the staff of the organisation so that members did not become remote from the day to day challenges facing staff. Over time, many staff benefitted from the members' experience and support in solving difficult problems.

Formal Council meetings always included a day or half day field trip, which Gathorne expected all to attend; he

did not appreciate solely office based people. He led these visits enthusiastically and always involved several partners to English Nature. There were some infamous occasions when the Council members possibly cursed him under their breath. One of the Council's first visits was to the Wash in mid-winter. The Wash is a huge embayment on the east coast of England with a vast population of birds in winter. Our visit coincided with a north-easterly storm. When the wind is from the north-east across the sea (and thus almost directly from the Arctic), it is a very cold place. Despite the conditions Gathorne was of course undeterred and wanted a full visit. He led his troops (aka Council members) across the inter-tidal areas in freezing conditions (incidentally a site close to the old lighthouse once occupied by Sir Peter Scott). It was snowing heavily, although few flakes landed as the gale-force winds whizzed the flakes along horizontally! And when we were finished and back to a warm fire in a hotel, Gathorne talked cheerfully of a great visit, a view perhaps not shared by his Council members. Incidentally it was the last mid-winter field visit the Council ever made! Gathorne seemed just as happy in these conditions as in the tropical rain forests where he had worked in his younger days.

There were, of course, many visits made in beautiful sunshine and summer warmth. Notable amongst these was a visit to one of England's finest meadows in Oxfordshire, and one to the Yorkshire fells. His resilience was again on display in Cornwall when a summer visit produced soft sunshine and warmth followed by an afternoon of torrential rain while we botanised along the cliffs. Few of us had ever been wetter, but Gathorne seemed not to notice. Having experienced tropical rain in Brunei with Gathorne, I could understand his reaction in a way that, perhaps, others could not. For him, it was really only a shower.

In contrast to Gathorne's love of field studies of all kinds, he was equally at home with the office based duties of a Chairman. Most of his tenure as Chairman was in the era before e-mails, now hard to believe less than twenty years later. Everyone soon became familiar with Gathorne's distinctive handwriting offering pithy observations. Gathorne used his formidable intellect and grasp of scientific and other evidence when discussing controversial issues with Government Ministers. His politeness and calmness often lulled them into a false sense of security in a meeting, before Gathorne would intervene sharply and with great skill to undermine their arguments. It always reminded me of what one of Gathorne's aristocratic forebears might have done, namely to use skilfully a rapier to wound before the adversary was aware. On second meetings intelligent Ministers were always much more wary.

Throughout his time as English Nature's Chairman, he continued to contribute to international nature conservation issues, both through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and directly through his continuing work on scientific matters, notably in Malaysia and Brunei. These activities included contributions to many scientific meetings and committees, to leading expeditions, for example to Brunei, and editing and writing on diverse subjects. His overall contribution to

English Nature was well recognised by those with whom he worked, but was, perhaps, less widely recognised outside the organisation than it should have been.

While this volume of the Raffles Bulletin of Zoology recognises his eightieth birthday, his sixtieth birthday occurred while he was English Nature's Chairman. He held a lively party, based around country dancing, in the barn at his Suffolk home. Many English Nature staff members were invited and were astonished to see him in a loud checked shirt and red braces, looking like a character from the mid-west of the USA, dancing continuously throughout the event. Gathorne always gave one a pleasant surprise. Unsurprisingly he insisted on no birthday presents, but instead suggested a donation to the Suffolk Wildlife Trust.

After eight successful years his time as Chairman came to an end. There were many events organised by staff to bid him a fond farewell, while the Council and executive Directors

organised a wonderful farewell dinner. Naturally Gathorne wanted to be giving something rather than receiving. Thus he organised the production of nearly one thousand special coffee mugs to mark his retirement, so that he could present one to everyone on the staff of English Nature. I still treasure mine, as I know others do. I think there could be no more fitting ending to this article than to repeat the quotation from Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883) which he chose to decorate the mug.

“Fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future fears.

Tomorrow! Why, tomorrow I may be myself with yesterday's sev'n thousand years.

Ah, fill the cup—what boots it to repeat how time is slipping underneath out feet.

Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday, why fret about them if today be sweet.”