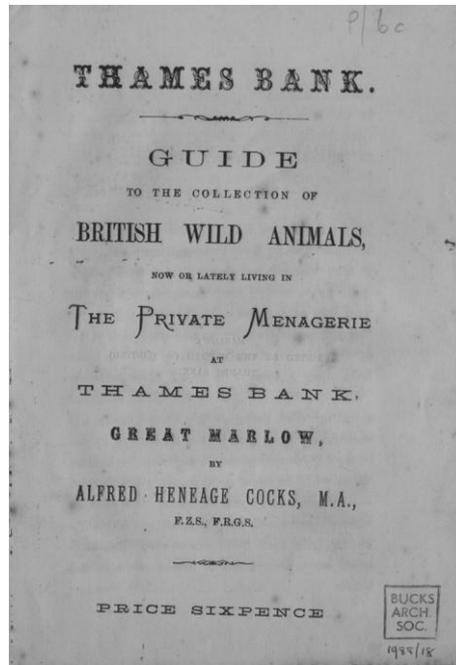


THE COCKS MENAGERIE

Browsing through the pamphlet boxes in the BAS library is a constant source of delight. I recently came across a curiosity, interesting not only for its subject matter but for the light it sheds on one of the Society's former luminaries.



Alfred Heneage Cocks (1851-1928) was from a wealthy banking family, a gentleman of independent means and life-long bachelor, able to indulge his passions for history and the natural world. He is perhaps best known for his monumental work, *The Church Bells of Buckinghamshire*, and for nearly 16 years he was the Society's Hon. Secretary and later the curator of what became the County Museum as well as being a prolific contributor to *Records of Bucks*.

His 'hands-on' approach to the study of natural history is apparent from a small pamphlet to be found in Box P/6C in our library - *Guide to the Collection of British Wild Animals now or lately living in The Private Menagerie at Thames Bank Great Marlow*. Thames Bank was the Cocks family home next to the lock at Marlow (since replaced by another house with the same name).

In the *Guide* Cocks says: "my menagerie...is not a mere collection of pets...I think the mere fact of hundreds of bits, many severe & a few dangerous, which I have received at the hands, or rather teeth, of my beasts... is the best refutation I can give to the idea of their being 'pets'; but I have kept these specimens of our native fauna with the object of becoming better acquainted with their forms & manners & customs than can be done by reading all the books on the subject & looking at stuffed skins..."

The list of specimens includes wild cats, foxes, pine martens, polecats, weasels, badgers, otters, rats, mice, voles and birds, including a marsh harrier

captured at Bourne End, and he notes how and where the animals were acquired and when they died. Two male pole cats from Penzance were recorded as “killed by Wild Cat, September 1873” which makes one wonder about the security-arrangements within the menagerie.

But the entry which really caught my eye was that for the hedgehog *Erinaceus Europæus*:

“Specimens-numerous.- Among them may be noticed one, an adult male, from near Oxford, which I tamed in an hour or less, by making drunk with beer; another (also an adult male), from near Marlow, which was of a most ferocious disposition, being the only one, out of the many specimens which I have kept that was so. He would fly straight at a finger when held near him, and on raising one’s hand he would continue hanging on like a bulldog, for several minutes.”

Thames Bank was sold in 1900 and Cocks moved, with his menagerie, to Poynetts at Skirmett. According to his obituary in *Records of Bucks* (vol. 12) he decreased his collection owing to food shortages in World War I and only a pair of eagle-owls remained when Cocks died in 1928. “The last wild cat died at the end of 1927, having lived 16 years in captivity, which he considered a ‘record’.” I can’t help thinking a diet of polecat may have been a contributing factor!

In addition to the *Guide* many of Cocks’ other writings can be found in our library and we also have a copy of an excellent family history *The House of Cocks* written by Hugh Grice.

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