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# The founding of the British Ornithologists' Club, and its main protagonists

by Robert P. Prŷs-Jones

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**SUMMARY.**—The British Ornithologists' Club (BOC) was founded in 1892 by a group of British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) members who wished to meet to discuss matters ornithological more frequently than the existing BOU annual meeting. This paper overviews the process leading up to the inaugural BOC meeting, the backgrounds of the 15 founder members who attended it and how the BOC developed over its first season (October 1892–June 1893). As such, it will provide the background for more detailed information on each of the founders that is planned to appear subsequently as a series of blogs on the BOC website.

A proposal for setting up an Ornithological Club, as an integral part of the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU), was first formally broached at the 1892 Annual Meeting of the BOU, which took place on 18 May of that year. 'After the Dinner [attended by 28 BOU members and guests] a proposition was made that an Ornithological Club should be formed for the purpose of holding monthly meetings, at which papers should be read and specimens exhibited. A Committee, consisting of the Earl of Gainsborough, Mr. Seebohm, Mr. Howard Saunders, Mr. Bidwell, and Dr. Bowdler Sharpe, was appointed to consider the advisability of carrying out the proposed scheme.' (Anon. 1892: 476). Of these five gentlemen, Saunders, Seebohm and Sharpe comprised the ordinary committee members of the BOU for the 1891–92 year, with Gainsborough and Bidwell also naturally being BOU members.

According to Sclater (1909), who was on the BOU Committee at the time as editor of the *Ibis*, the driving force behind this proposal was undoubtedly Richard Bowdler Sharpe, the genial, sociable, enthusiastic and incredibly hard-working Curator of Birds at the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH), South Kensington (Fig. 1). The Committee seemingly never formally met, possibly because Gainsborough rather inconveniently lived in Rutland, unlike the



Figure 1. Richard Bowdler Sharpe, the driving force in setting up the British Ornithologists' Club.

others who were London-based, but Sclater (1909) noted that much discussion of the pros and cons of the idea took place during the summer of 1892. As a result, the Inaugural Meeting of what was now called the British Ornithologists' Club (BOC) took place at the Mona Hotel, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, on 5 October 1892, attended by 15 BOU members, who thereby became the founder members of the BOC (Table 1), and four guests, at which an initial set of rules for the Club was drawn up (Table 2).

As Sharpe (1893: iii) stated in his Preface to vol. 1 of the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* (*Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.*), the core reason for setting up the BOC was 'giving the Members of the British Ornithologists' Union an opportunity for meeting more frequently than the customary once a year'. At the inaugural meeting, it was decided that such regular meetings should occur monthly from October to June inclusive, i.e. nine per season (Table 3). Furthermore, as noted by Snow (1992: 1), 'Although the rules make no mention of it, the meetings, which were held at a London restaurant or hotel, included a dinner. Thus the Club had both a scientific and a social purpose'. From the beginning of 1893, the meeting place was moved from the Mona Hotel to the Restaurant Frascati, 32 Oxford Street (Table 3), where it remained for the rest of the first season. One other key point in the initial rules was the decision that 'an Abstract of the proceedings be printed as soon as possible after each Meeting' (Table 2), marking the start of publication of the *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.*, which has continued uninterrupted ever since.

The 15 founder members comprised a stimulating cross-section of professional and amateur ornithologists, the latter of whom varied in the degree to which they had a research

TABLE 1

Biographical details of the 15 BOU members who attended the inaugural meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club on 5 October 1892.

Surname	First names	Year of birth/ death	Year joined BOU	Where lived in 1892	1892-93 BOC meetings attended	<i>Ibis</i> obituary; biographical notice
Bidwell	Edward	1845-1929	1880	London	9	72: 132-133 (1930)
Blanford	William Thomas	c.1833-1905	1873	London	1	47: 643-647 (1905)
Crowley	Philip	1837-1900	1882	Croydon, Surrey	5	43: 352-353 (1901)
Graham	William	c.1850-97	1886	Crayford, Kent	3	39: 296 (1897)
Monk	Thomas James	c.1830-99	1890	Lewes, Sussex	1	42: 402 (1900)
Ogilvie-Grant	William Robert	1863-1924	1890	London	7	66: 774-780 (1924)
Penrose	Francis (Frank) George	1857-1932	1891	London	8	74: 690-691 (1932)
Salvadori Paleotti	Count Adelardo Tommaso	1835-1923	1872	London/Turin, Italy	3	66: 159-161 (1924)
Saunders	Howard	1835-1907	1870	London	9	50: 169-172 (1908); 50 (Jubilee Suppl.): 223-226 (1909)
Sclater	Philip Lutley	1829-1913	1858	London/Winchfield, Hants	8	55: 642-686 (1913); 50 (Jubilee Suppl.): 129-137 (1909)
Sclater	William Lutley	1863-1944	1891	Windsor, Berkshire	3	87: 115-121 (1945)
Seebohm	Henry	1832-95	1873	London	9	38: 159-162 (1896)
Sharpe	Richard Bowdler	1847-1909	1871	London	8	52: 352-358 (1910); 50 (Jubilee Suppl.): 199-201 (1909)
Wharton	Henry Thornton	1846-95	1878	London	2	38: 159 (1896)
Young	John	1838-1901	1878	London	4	44: 173-174 (1902)

TABLE 2

The rules of the British Ornithologists' Club as proposed and adopted at the inaugural meeting on 5 October 1892 (*Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 1: v, 1893).

- I. That a Club be constituted, to consist of Members of the British Ornithologists' Union, and to be called the British Ornithologists' Club.
- II. That any Member of the B. O. U. can become a Member of the Club by signifying his wish to do so to the Secretary, and paying a Subscription of *Five Shillings* for the Session.
- III. That the Club shall meet on the third Wednesday in every month, from October to June inclusive, at times and places to be arranged by the Committee.
- IV. That at the Meeting papers on Ornithological subjects be read, specimens exhibited, and discussion invited.
- V. That an Abstract of the proceedings be printed as soon as possible after each Meeting, under the title of the 'Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club', and distributed gratis to every member. Copies of this monthly Abstract to be printed and sold at a shilling each.
- VI. That R. BOWDLER SHARPE be appointed Editor of the 'Bulletin,' and HOWARD SAUNDERS Secretary and Treasurer to the Club.
- VII. That the affairs of the Club shall be managed by a Committee of three members (to be elected, and one of whom is to be changed every year\*); together with the Editor of 'The Ibis', the Editor of the 'Bulletin', and the Secretary and Treasurer, *ex officio*.

(\* At the inaugural Meeting E. Bidwell, the Earl of Gainsborough, and H. Seebohm were the three Members elected.)

TABLE 3

The ten meetings (one inaugural, nine regular) during the first season of the British Ornithologists' Club, October 1892 to June 1893. \*NB: Although no guests were formally noted as attending the 19 October meeting, at least two (G. E. Shelley, who became a member later during the first season, and F. W. Styan) were clearly present as they made presentations recorded in the published abstract of proceedings.

Meeting	Date	Place	Members present	Recorded guests	Total BOC membership
Inaugural	5 Oct 1892	Mona Hotel	15	4	15
1	19 Oct 1892	Mona Hotel	18	0*	60
2	16 Nov 1892	Mona Hotel	14	1	72
3	21 Dec 1892	Mona Hotel	18	3	78
4	18 Jan 1893	Restaurant Frascati	13	1	79
5	15 Feb 1893	Restaurant Frascati	15	3	
6	15 Mar 1893	Restaurant Frascati	9	3	
7	19 Apr 1893	Restaurant Frascati	15	5	
8	17 May 1893	Restaurant Frascati	16	0	
9	21 June 1893	Restaurant Frascati	16	2	85

and publishing interest in the subject. The professionals included Richard Bowdler Sharpe, in charge of the bird collections of the BMNH, his assistant and eventual successor, William Ogilvie-Grant, and the eminent zoologist Philip Lutley Sclater, trained in both mathematics and the law but with an abiding interest in natural history, who had been Secretary of the Zoological Society since 1859, published widely on zoology and had devoted much time also to editing the *Ibis*, journal of the BOU. His eldest son, William Lutley Sclater, was likewise a professional zoologist, having trained in natural sciences and subsequently worked in the Indian Museum in Calcutta; in 1892 he was back in Britain as a science master at Eton College, but would later become Director of the South African Museum in Cape Town.

Pre-eminent in publishing among those who, in the sense of how they had earned their main living, were amateurs comprised the merchant banker Howard Saunders, already by 1892 author of the hugely influential *An illustrated manual of British birds*, an authority on the Laridae and an enthusiastic committee man, and the steel manufacturer Henry Seebohm, renowned for his research on Russian and Japanese birds as well as on the Charadriidae. Although some founder members had spent extensive periods abroad, perhaps not

surprisingly all but one were British, the exception being the esteemed Italian professional ornithologist Adelardo Luigi Salvadori Paleotti, Vice-Director of the Turin Museum and an honorary member of the BOU, who in 1892 was temporarily based in London while working with Bowdler Sharpe on a volume of the *Catalogue of birds in the British Museum*. More biographical details of each of the founder members can be found in their obituaries and, for a few individuals, other memoirs that were subsequently published in *Ibis* and are referenced in the final column of Table 1. They should each also be the subject of blogs scheduled to appear on the BOC website (<https://boc-online.org>) over the coming months.

Among the founder members, some attended few if any further meetings during the first season of the BOC's existence, but roughly half became very regular attendees (Table 1). In the case of Salvadori, he attended the first three meetings but then his ability to do so was cut short by his return to Italy towards the end of 1892. A further 47 individuals who had become BOC members after the inaugural meeting also attended subsequent meetings during the first season. Among these were three, the Hon. Walter Rothschild (owner of the Tring Museum), his bird curator Ernst Hartert, and the prominent ornithologist Captain G. E. Shelley, who had attended prior meetings as guests. Fourteen additional individuals were formally noted as attending purely as guests, although there were clearly also at least some others, as F. W. Styan and C. Hose certainly not only attended but spoke in the first regular meeting in late October 1892 without being so noted. One guest, E. Degen, was particularly notable for having been invited to be the sole speaker at the inaugural meeting, with his substantial contribution *On some of the main features in the evolution of the bird's wing* being published in full subsequently in *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* with an extended introduction by another guest at this meeting, W. P. Pycraft (Degen 1894).

At the final meeting of the first season, in June 1893, the Treasurer could proudly state 'that out of 200 Members of the British Ornithologists' Union resident in the United Kingdom, no fewer than 85 had joined and paid their subscriptions to the B. O. Club since the first intimation of its formation.' (Saunders 1893). This is an impressive figure that points to a desire by BOU members, notably those within easy reach of London where all meetings were held, for increased social interaction with their ornithologically-minded contemporaries. Interestingly, the membership list published in July 1893 included only 84 names, with Salvadori not figuring (Anon. 1893); seemingly the fact of his now being resident abroad was the reason for this, as all members listed had British addresses.

The status of one individual mentioned above has as yet not been clarified: Charles William Noel Francis, third Earl of Gainsborough (1850–1926), who lived at Exton Park, Oakham, Rutland. He had succeeded to the Earldom in 1881 and had joined the BOU in 1886. Although clearly closely involved in events leading up to the founding of the BOC and listed as a member (Anon. 1893), he did not attend any meeting in the first season. Indeed, he is not recorded as attending one until a rare joint dinner meeting of the BOU and BOC which took place at the Restaurant Frascati on 16 May 1900. Thereafter, he appeared at very occasional BOC meetings, and even more rarely contributed a brief recorded comment on a talk or presentation. Thus, at the 24 May 1905 meeting, he added the following to a discussion on the apparent lack of scent of an incubating partridge: 'The Earl of Gainsborough observed that his old friend Grantley Berkeley fully 40 years ago had called his attention to the fact that sitting game-birds had no scent.' (Gainsborough 1905). He remained a member of the BOC until 1917 and further resigned from the BOU at its AGM in March 1922 (*Ibis* 64: 395). Alone among those intimately involved in the founding of the BOC, no obituary of him appeared in *Ibis* following his death in 1926.

Since its founding in 1892, well over 1,000 regular meetings of the BOC have occurred and been recorded in the *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* Having been established at a time when both



the British Empire was near its peak extent, with numerous British officials posted overseas for lengthy periods of time, and numerous new bird taxa were still being described, BOC meetings perhaps not surprisingly assumed a key role as a venue where returning, almost entirely amateur, ornithologists could meet with and present their specimen findings to British-based colleagues, some highly knowledgeable on taxonomy and identification. Likewise, overseas ornithologists who sent interesting specimen material to the BMNH could do so in the knowledge that novelties could rapidly be presented at BOC meetings by Bowdler Sharpe or Ogilvie-Grant and then formally published very quickly in the ensuing *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* issue. Although with the demise of empire and the massive diminution of novel taxa to describe, the role of the BOC and its meetings has evolved, the Club remains an integral part of the worldwide ornithological scene.

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