

This year (1996), the Manchester Field Club, combined with the British Empire Naturalists' Association Manchester Branch, later to become Greater Manchester Branch is 60 years old so to celebrate this, a few gleanings from the old minute books.

The first A.G.M. was held on the 23rd. January, 1937, in the Altrincham Natural History Society room, in Altrincham Library. There were only five members present, all of whom finished up either in office or on the committee! A note in the minutes says that the Portfolio would be interchanged with that of the Fylde Branch. The second A.G.M. was a rather better attended do, with 13 present, amongst them being Phil Newton, who is still a member, although he cannot now attend meetings. This particular meeting was held in the Windmill Inn, Carrington, after the Carrington Moss ramble. Tea was taken at some convenient hostelry or Tea Rooms after rambles, and, for a period, business meetings were held at the same time, with the programme apparently set at quarterly committee meetings.

Between 1939 and 1945 no A.G.M.'s were held, although the branch continued on in much the usual way. The 1945 A.G.M. was held in a cafe at Alderley Edge, whilst everyone was eating their tea (this was minuted). The branch subscription was set at 2/- (10p), and Phil Newton was voted into the newly created post of Rambles Secretary. In the 1946 meeting, a motion was passed, that future A.G.M.'s be held on the second Saturday in November. The speed at which rambles were taken, and the distances covered was causing some consternation too. The conclusion was 'to take rambles at one to one and a half miles per hour, with all day rambles not more than about six miles'.

By 1948, a post of President had been created 'to honour one of its members', that member being Giles Owen. Also around this time, problems with the numbers of members attending rambles were occurring. The first casualty was the tea, because 'it discouraged those who had not booked tea from coming on rambles'. Finding suitable tea rooms was a bit of a problem too. Increasing the number of rambles to one a week, then decreasing them to one a fortnight was tried, all without too much success - the average attendance on rambles remained more or less constant, at 15! There was a 'B.E.N.A. Library' too, but the librarian, Mr Dearnaley, decided that most of the books were of very little use, so the service was suspended 'for the time being'.

Since the decision in 1946 to hold meetings on the second Saturday in November, they had all been held on the first Saturday, at the Fernlee Social Club in Altrincham, but after numerous complaints from those members living in the Manchester area, from November 1st, 1952, meetings were to be held in the College for Adult Education in Lower Mosley Street, Manchester. 1953 was the first meeting which was held on the second Saturday in November, and saw the introduction of the present format for the committee, where two people are elected for a term of three years at each A.G.M. A rule stated that those retiring could not be immediately re-elected, but there is no evidence that it was ever applied. A book, with illuminated bookplate was presented to Mrs. Burns for 'her long service to the branch'. How long isn't recorded.

There were 80 members in 1955, the first time membership was minuted, and 83 in 1956, when the seriously ailing funds forced the branch subscription to be raised to 3/- (15p). In the same year 62 members attended a talk by Mr. John Armitage, on the birds and flowers of the Pennines. The very first bus trip, to Lathkill Dale, was in 1957. It was also the first year that Saturday rambles were better attended than Sunday ones.

Bess Harthan took over as editor of the Portfolio in 1960. Subscriptions were again in the news and 1961 saw a rise to 6/- (30p), but collections at indoor meetings were abolished. It appears rather strange that people objected to an economically sound subscription, but didn't object to a collection! 1963 saw the membership rise to 90, and a 'botanical survey' of square 33/88 (SJ88) was commenced.

The following year, the post of President became electable each year. Giles Owen was replaced by David Mackie. Money - or its absence - was still the main topic of conversation, and 1967 saw another increase in subscription to 7/6d (37.5p). This was, for some strange reason, to become 35p when decimalised.

Very little happened for the next few years - cost of membership cards, cost of bus trips, and some concern about the condition of a bridge in Styal woods, until 1973, when meetings were suddenly moved to the Friends' Meeting House in Mount Street, without any explanation, although the high room charges at Mount Street were commented on at the following A.G.M. Another consequence of the move was that the 'wine and cheese evening' had to be changed to a 'coffee evening'! 1974, and another move, to the New College of Further Education, at All Saints, and an explanation for the first move! The portfolio came into the news in 1975, when it was decided to discontinue it in the form of a single book to be passed around - some issues took several years to resurface, once put out to the membership - and change it to 'a pamphlet containing reports... and articles of interest, but no illustrations... in order that each member can receive a copy'. Another period of financial discussion ended in the subscription being raised to 75p in 1978. Some of the bus trips had been struggling to make ends meet, and the 'bring and buy' was heavily relied on to save the day. A focus for activities appeared in the form of the North West Naturalists' Union Golden Jubilee Exhibition, at the end of 1979, and the proposed hosting of the B.E.N.A. National A.G.M. in 1981.

Towards the end of 1980, two things happened: the room rental was almost doubled, and B.E.N.A. subscription was also doubled. This prompted an E.G.M. to discuss the possibility of leaving the B.E.N.A. at the end of 1981, and forming an independent Society. A vote was taken, favouring independence by 37 to 8.

The 1981 A.G.M. was held in the Christian Mission, in St. Anne's Churchyard, and set up the new society. The name Manchester Field Club was agreed upon, and most of the present working practices were set up. A subscription of £2 was set. Publicity, or its absence, was discussed by committee and at A.G.M.'s for quite some years after, with numerous ideas to try to raise the Club's profile a little. About this time, the North West Naturalists' Union started up an insurance scheme, which took ages to produce a fuzzy explanation of what cover it gives. A couple of years on, and some people were finding the room in the Christian Mission rather gloomy, suggesting that an alternative room be found. When the Mission announced that it was to close in 1985, alternative accommodation had to be found, and a move was made to the Y.M.C.A. in a room no one could find! This was not to be for long, as they too were to close the building a couple of years later.

1987 found the Club amongst the finery of Manchester Town Hall, and discussing two initiatives from the N.W.N.U., a series of outdoor meetings to be hosted by the societies within the union, which would be open to all, and an exhibition at Bolton titled 'A Walk on the Wild Side', which gave publicity, but in the wrong place. A considerable amount of archive material in the form of portfolios, including the old hand-written ones, was put into Manchester Library.

Finances came back under the spotlight, and 1991 saw the subscription raised to £3, then to £4 the year after, and to £5 in 1995. The reports came under scrutiny too, and possible alternatives were looked at, to find something possibly cheaper. Fortunately, because it was seen as an important contact amongst the members, it was decided that it would be continued, but try to be more economical. The lack of people attending rambles was again in the news. Reasonable numbers attend early and late, but few in summer. It was suggested that less rambles may be better attended. Because of poor support, it was decided to abandon the bus trips from 1996.