

Biddulph Grange and the Creation of the World

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, is widely regarded as one of the most influential books of the 19th Century, perhaps of any century. After years of conjecture and guesswork, Darwin had finally proposed a convincing mechanism by which life on earth evolved.

Darwin called the process "natural selection"; Herbert Spencer subsequently re-configured it more memorably as "survival of the fittest".

Even today, when some schools, both here and in the US, teach Creationism alongside Evolution, it's possible to get a sense of the upheaval, and the collision of world views, that Darwin's book provoked.

It was not simply the unpalatable proposition that we were descended from apes. If, said some, the account of Creation in Genesis was now in doubt, what else was to be sent to the scrap-heap? The New Testament? The Ten Commandments? The Church itself?

What is often viewed as the defining moment in that debate was the head-to-head between Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce, which took place at the Oxford University Natural History Museum in June 1860. The juggernauts of Intelligent Design and Evolution crashed head on.

But in a rather more tranquil part of Staffordshire, and far from the madding crowd of academia, one man was putting together his own, rather gentler, challenge to Mr Darwin, and he was doing so in his garden.

Biddulph Grange is one of the most interesting gardens in the Midlands, even if you don't happen to be especially interested in gardens. The man behind it was James Bateman (1811-97), more than ably assisted by his wife, Maria, and his polymath friend and sometime marine painter, Edward Cooke.

Bateman came from a family made rich by the Industrial Revolution. His grandfather – James senior - had embraced steam power and established an ironworks at Salford. Later he turned his attention to the rich potential of the North Staffordshire coalfields and purchased land at Knypersley, to the north of Stoke-on-Trent.

Knypersley Hall was handed on to his son, John Bateman, and it was here that James Bateman junior grew up and began to take an interest in horticulture. By the time James moved next door in 1842, to the newly erected Biddulph Grange, he knew exactly what he wanted in a garden. And it was to be as ambitious (and expensive) as any in this over-reaching age.

Biddulph Grange was a Great Exhibition of a garden, the whole world in one green space, with planting to reflect the spirit of Italy and China, Egypt, England and the Americas. Nor was this scheme limited to plants alone. Buildings and bridges and tunnels were assembled to aid the transition between the worlds. You enter an Egyptian tomb at one point, take a few turns and emerge from an Elizabethan cottage at the other.

But it was closer to the house that James Bateman engineered the most challenging of his garden features. While most wealthy owners would have been content with a sculpture arcade, or a large conservatory, Bateman had in mind a geological gallery. And in this gallery he would recount the story of the first seven days of the world, when everything was made that was made.

At more than 100 feet long, built of sandstone and floored in Minton tiles, this was a serious reinstatement of the great narrative of the Book of Genesis. Yet Bateman did not turn his back entirely upon centuries of geological enquiry; his gallery was, as it were, a synthesis of the two.

His first day – the first room of the gallery - covered the Precambrian Age, followed by the Cambrian and Carboniferous Ages, and so on to the creation of life in all its forms. Bateman used examples of rock strata and minerals to illustrate the steady progress of geological time, and opposite them a series of fossils to chart the birth of fish, birds and mammals. The head of an ichthyosaur was displayed on Day Four, and a mammoth's tusk on Day Six.

And being a gardener at heart, James Bateman had his chronological model for the creation of the plant kingdom too, placing ferns close to the beginning of the sequence and orchids near the end.

Of course, the Staffordshire landowner had not entirely cooked up this brief history of time in his own potting-shed. It probably owed much to the ideas of the geologist, William Buckland, who was teaching at Oxford while Bateman was a student there. Buckland's attempts to reconcile what the fossil record was saying with the biblical narrative was exactly what Bateman was trying to do in his gallery.

The Grange's geological gallery represents then, not the whole of time, but a very specific moment in it, when Victorian Science and Religion collided.

We do not know exactly how the owner envisaged the seventh day – the day of rest – for that final section of the gallery was removed when Biddulph Grange was commandeered as a hospital in the 1930s. Indeed, the conversion of the house into a hospital in the 1920s had removed most of the furnishings from the gallery anyway.

Only since 2002, when the National Trust recovered ownership of this part of the site, can efforts be made to reinstate James Bateman's grand scheme of Creation. And that, I think, would be a worthwhile project indeed.