



## **Weather, Locality and History in Hampshire: The Records of Gilbert White as a source for climate change**

***A talk for Worthy's Local History Group by Dr. Robert Gray***

Dr Gray is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Winchester and is studying the work of Gilbert White, the eighteenth century naturalist, who lived at Selborne. Gilbert White was born 1720 and died 1793. He studied at Oriel College Oxford and took curacies around the country, but ended up back at Selborne. His publications included the 'Garden Kalendar' and the 'Naturalist's Journal' and his most well-known 'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne', which is apparently the 4<sup>th</sup> most reproduced book in English and has an enduring appeal, the only piece published in his lifetime. It is seen as one of the founding texts of British nature writing. He was not alone in the eighteenth century with many naturalists and indeed weather recorders doing the same thing, but few have stood the test of time. His work was written in tumultuous times, but makes no mention of them, and much of his appeal is in an escapism to nature. However his own motivations were more utilitarian. It had a clearly defined purpose, as part of the broader Enlightenment project, to formalise laws of weather, purging the public of superstition and contributing to improved agricultural practice.

Dr Gray is looking at the idea of seasonality from White's records and by talking to the community. He started with the question, can Gilbert White's records create a local sense of seasonality? He began by outlining the concept of the 'Weather World', in which the weather forms an integral part of the landscape we live in. We inhabit the sky and the reality of the atmosphere – rain, sun and wind – as well as the flora and fauna we see and experience. As an example, he gave the warm winter of 2015-16, where many plants flowered early. We saw this in our weather world as Spring in winter. Gilbert White combined regular recordings of weather with barometer, thermometer and rainfall measurements etc, with very subjective observations of the landscape he inhabited. He combined both and saw how they relate and perhaps it is why his books are so popular. Dr. Gray gave numerous examples of his horticultural, weather and landscape diary entries exhibiting this combination.

Other naturalist writers of the time suggested one must stay in one place to make such good observations and indeed White did, nearly always staying in Selborne; he was remarkably untravelling. But he did have much correspondence with other observers, scientists and naturalists around the country. He had a combination of a knowledge of scientific theories, the leisure time to undertake regular observations, contact with the local area and landscapes and contact with others around the country, all feeding into his works. His enduring appeal, Dr. Gray felt, was his ability to convert dry recordings to nuanced and personalised observations.

White constructed weather through memory, place, weather observations and horticulture (he liked to grow melons apparently and often commented on the relative success of their growth!) to give a vivid impression. In his writing, he confirms the quirks of Hampshire and British weather, which frequently defies expectations and perhaps explains our inherent distrust of forecasts! The talk finished with a discussion of the group's own memories of weather events and weather worlds.