

Report on the meeting of the Wharfedale Naturalists' Society, 24 January 2012

(for the Ilkley Gazette)

Tonight's meeting was an intriguing presentation by archaeologist and classicist Gillian Hovell: 'What's in a name?'. This talk opened a magical path into the world of classification. She started with Aristotle, explaining the original logic of observing organisms and classifying them by shared features. In the 18th century, Linnaeus picked up the baton, developing a Latin-based hierarchical nomenclature understandable to all literate people, regardless of their individual vernacular tongues. As he put it: '*Nomina si nescis, perit et cognitio rerum*' ('Who knoweth not the names, knoweth not the subject'). Man has a driving need to understand and record the world around him. With her brilliant choice of slides, we explored the great divisions of kingdom/phylum/class/order/family/genus/species: the Latin names were explained and illustrated so that everything fell into place. She went on to remind us why the standard binomial system developed, and how the two terms really do define an organism, describing salient features such as its look, its colour, habitat or location, or perhaps who discovered it. She made a point of focusing on species found in Wharfedale to illustrate her explanations, making her presentation all the more relevant. The research finding that learning Latin is good for the brain only added to our delight, and all of us who had studied it but now struggled to use it felt a renewed fascination with this most useful of scientific tools. Best of all, though, Gillian made it fun. We left with our minds teeming with delicious nuggets of Latin, and a renewed sense of wonder at the power of words to pin down our world.

Lynn Loader

Vice Chairman

Wharfedale Naturalists Society