



Why History Matters - The Countess of Derby's History Study Days

The Life & Legacy of the 13th Earl of Derby - 15th October 2025

The 13th Earl of Derby (1775 - 1851), who inherited his title on the death of his father in 1834, was one of the United Kingdom's leading natural historians during the first half of the nineteenth century, specialising in zoology. As Lord Stanley he was elected President both of the Linnean Society and the newly founded Zoological Society of London (the London Zoo). He formed one of the finest libraries of natural history books, as well as acquiring important watercolours by artists working between the late seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, many of which are still in the Library at Knowsley Hall. In the park at Knowsley he formed one of the largest private collections of living animals ever known, obtained from across the world. After the 13th Earl of Derby's death in 1851 Queen Victoria chose to take the Himalayan Monals, the London Zoo the Cape Elands, and the rest of the living animals were sold to private collectors and zoos across Britain and Europe. The important collection of around 30,000 specimens in the museum at Knowsley was bequeathed by Lord Derby to the people of the city of Liverpool, thus founding the Derby Museum, now World Museum Liverpool, the founding institution within the National Museums Liverpool Group.



In the early 1830s Lord Stanley met the young artist Edward Lear (1812 - 88) at the London Zoo, where the painter was creating highly detailed watercolours of parrots, forty-two of which Lear then published in a lavish folio volume, 'Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae' in 1832. Highly impressed by Lear's talent, Lord Stanley invited him to Knowsley to paint in watercolours the animals, which lived within a nine and a half mile perimeter wall, in fields, on lakes and ponds and in specially designed aviaries and cages.

Edward Lear lived at Knowsley Hall between 1831 and 1837. Edward Lear concentrated most of his energies on drawing both the living and preserved

animals in beautifully delineated and vividly coloured large watercolours; now thought to be some of the finest natural history studies ever made. These watercolours even rival the work of Lear's famous American contemporary John James Audubon, who was visited at the home of the Rathbone family in south Liverpool by the 13th Earl of Derby, who much admired Audubon's paintings. A selection of the finest of Lear's watercolours was published in 1846, faithfully lithographed in colour by J.W. Moore in the first of two volumes entitled 'Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley'. This stunning book was financed by Lord Derby and edited by John Gray of the British Museum, who also selected the folio-sized illustrations and wrote the accompanying texts.

While living intermittently at Knowsley, Lear also often entertained Lord Derby's grandchildren, great-nephews and great-nieces. From this talent for amusing children the artist developed his skill of composing limericks and nonsense verse, as well as drawing lively caricatures. A selection of these poems and drawings were first published in 1846 in his ever-popular Book of Nonsense, which has never been out of print. Later, Lear published further collections of nonsense poems and alphabets; perhaps his most famous poem is 'The Owl and the Pussycat'.

In 1837 Lear's eyesight began to suffer due to the close work needed to produce highly accurate natural history drawings and watercolours. It also thought that Lear wanted to escape from the exacting authority of John Gould, who had also employed Lear for illustrative work at the Zoological Society of London. Having already developed a talent as a landscape artist during tours of Ireland and Lake District, Lear decided to tour Italy and record his travels in drawings and watercolours. Both Lord Derby and his nephew Robert Hornby generously sponsored Lear's first extended visit to Rome and central Italy.

For the rest of his life Lear travelled abroad, producing landscapes and living for the most part in Italy, but touring all over the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and India. On his visits back to England the artist usually revisited Knowsley and later corresponded assiduously with the 13th Earl of Derby's son and grandson, the 14th and 15th Earls of Derby respectively, who both remained committed collectors and patrons of Lear's landscape work. Looking back on his prolific and fulfilled life as an artist, achieved despite his many health problems, Lear always spoke fondly of his time at Knowsley as the happiest years of his life. He was immensely proud of the fact that three successive generations of the Stanley family had been committed supporters and patrons of himself as an artist.

SPEAKERS AND TIMINGS

09.30	Opening remarks by Lady Derby
09.45	Dr Alan Crosby - The early life of the 13 th Earl and his interests, family and passion for Natural History
10.30	Dr Clemency Fisher - Was this the biggest Zoo on Earth? The Aviary & Menagerie at Knowsley
11.15	Refreshments
11.45	Jenny Uglow - The Gleanings of the Menagerie 1846 & 1850 and Edward Lear
12.30	Lunch and Guided Tour
14.00	Dr Clemency Fisher - The continuing importance to science of the 13 th Earl of Derby's zoological museum
14.45	Dr Xanthe Brooke - The 13 th Earl's Collection of Miniatures and Paintings
15.30	Refreshments
16.00	Frank Cottrell Boyce - 2024 Children's Poet Laureate, on the limericks and their legacy - "How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear"
16.45	Closing Remarks by Lady Derby