

## The Rector's son-in-law and the First Cuckoo

### Letters to *The Times*

In January 1902 the Countess of Cavan, Mary Sneade Lambart, of Wheathampstead House, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times*:

Sir,

The correspondence about the early delivery of *The Times* is most interesting. I live 25 miles from London and *The Times* is delivered through a local agent at my door at 7 am punctually every day all the year round. It arrives by luggage train in local bundles for delivery via Hatfield to Wheathampstead. I consider it far better than by postal delivery.

Yours truly,

M S Cavan

Wheathampstead House, Wheathampstead

*The Times* was a popular and valued newspaper among the gentry of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Wheathampstead and letters to the editor were published on a range of subjects from local residents including Apsley Cherry-Garrard, Sir William Beach Thomas, Olivia Upton Robins and Rev Canon Owen Davys.



Richard Lydekker

*From copy in Harpenden LHS archives*

Lucy Marianne Davys, the eldest daughter of Rev Canon Owen Davys of St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, was married to Richard Lydekker, the naturalist, geologist and Keeper of Palaeontology at the British Museum. They lived in Harpenden and in 1913 Richard Lydekker wrote a pair of letters to *The Times* that attracted amusement among many readers.



Cuckoo *Wikimedia Commons Natural History.*

**While gardening this afternoon I heard a faint note, which led me to say to my under-gardener, who was working with me, 'Was that the cuckoo?' Almost immediately afterwards we heard the full double note of a cuckoo, repeated either two or three times, I am not quite sure which. The time was 3.40 and the bird appeared to be about a quarter of a mile away. There was not the slightest doubt that the song was that of the cuckoo.**

**The late Professor Newton, in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Yarrell's *British Birds* (vol 2, p. 389) stated that although the arrival of the cuckoo has frequently been reported in March, or even earlier, such records must be treated with suspicion, if not with incredulity. And Mr J E Harting (*Handbook of British Birds*, p.112) goes even further than this, stating that there is no authentic record of the arrival of the cuckoo in this country earlier than April 6.**

**R. Lydekker  
Harpenden Lodge, Feb 4**

A week later Lydekker wrote again, confessing:

**I regret to say that, in common with many other persons, I have been completely deceived in the matter of the supposed cuckoo of February 4. The note was uttered by a bricklayer's labourer at work on a house in the neighbourhood of the spot whence the note appeared to come. I have interviewed the man, who tells me that he is able to draw cuckoos from considerable distances by the exactness of his imitation of their notes, which he produces without the aid of any instrument.**

**R. Lydekker  
Harpenden Lodge, Feb 11**

Letters to *The Times* about hearing the first cuckoo have become a tradition ever since.

## Sources

R. LYDEKKER. 'The Arrival Of The Cuckoo.' *Times* 6 Feb. 1913: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

R. LYDEKKER. 'The Cuckoo.' *Times* 12 Feb. 1913: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

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