

Set in Stone

During the summer, Judith and I visited Biddulph Grange Gardens, which is a property near Congleton, owned and managed by the National Trust. The gardens were developed by James Bateman and his wife, Maria, when they moved there in 1839. They are very elaborately landscaped with hills, rocks and water features. There are tunnels, a mock Chinese temple, fun Ancient Egyptian sculptures, grottos, winding pathways and much more that delighted and surprised us as we wandered round. A great outing for anyone who can manage a few steps and likes exploring. Ideal for children.

James Bateman's family had made its money from coal mining, iron working, steam engines and cotton mills. James' interest was in plants and the new science of botany. Explorers had opened up previously-unknown land masses and plant hunters were scouring new territories to satisfy demand for exotic plants and trees. James was elected a member of the Royal Society for his work in breeding orchids. He also imported seeds of trees from all over the world to propagate and plant in his garden.

James was deeply religious, an Anglican lay preacher in the evangelical tradition. He shared, with many of his contemporaries, the belief that the fulfilment of Christ's promise to return to found God's kingdom on earth was imminent. He was urgent in his preaching at churches and in public lectures. The new scientific methods of studying evidence to support theories about the nature of the natural world had caused doubt and anxiety about the truth of the account of "creation" in Genesis, which the Church had taught was based on God's revelation to Moses. Many thought that if this truth were denied, then Christianity's foundations would be shaken.

James was a member of the scientific community and took a prominent part in the debate. He was well acquainted with coal seams and the theory that coal had been formed from trees, which had grown on earth millions of years ago. He knew the latest results of geological research on the strata of the earth and the fossils found in those strata. God could not have got it wrong but the scientific arguments were indisputable; all the species of living things were not created in a week.

He was able to reconcile, to his own satisfaction, the Biblical version of Creation with the scientific evidence by accepting the argument of a Scottish geologist, Hugh Miller, that the six days of Creation in Genesis represent six stages, which culminated in the creation of Man. God gave the earth to the one created in His own image and saw that "all was good". There followed the seventh day, on which God rested. This stage was continuing to this time and the development of his gardens had the purpose of demonstrating the great benevolence of God in creating such a rich and diverse world to support and give pleasure to man. As a response to Darwin's "On the Origin of Species", which argued for "survival of the fittest" to account for the emergence of different species, James wrote: "To the believer, however, the problem is not hard to solve. Ferns and other flowerless plants came early in the Divine programme, because the coal, into which they were ultimately to be converted, had need to be long in accumulating for the future comfort and civilisation of our race; while the genesis of orchids was postponed until the time drew near when Man, who was to be soothed by the gentle influence of their beauty, was about to appear on the scene."

In support of his lectures and sermons to convince people of this theory, James built a gallery through which visitors would pass to enter the gardens. In this gallery, he displayed 70 fossils arranged according to the "Day" in which they belonged, e.g. invertebrates under Day

2; corals, ferns and amphibians under Day 3 up to Day 6. Alongside these were placed illustrations of the geological strata. From Day 6, visitors would walk into the living display of God's world in his gardens. Most of these fossils have been lost and the National Trust is working to have copies made and on display in the gallery around next Easter.

The lectures, sermons, gallery and gardens then were James Bateman's preparations for the Advent of Christ, to lead people to a right relationship with God so that they would be part of that soon-to-be-established God's Kingdom on Earth.

I am indebted to Daniel Atherton, who is a development manager at Biddulph Gardens for the National Trust.

Robert Lock