

## May: Of mice (and rats) and men

We will be having an informal 'event' on [natural history in the churchyard](#) over the weekend of 6-7<sup>th</sup> June, part of '[Love Your Burial Ground Week](#)'. On Saturday evening we'll be bat watching and recording, doing some moth trapping, putting out night camera traps and footprint tunnels and then, on Sunday morning, we'll review what we find.

Shortly after this was announced at the beginning of last Sunday's service, excited at the news and during the opening hymn, a small mouse hopped across the floor, in front of the lectern with the bible, and directly under the 14<sup>th</sup> century arch that separates the chancel from the extended early Norman nave, where the rood screen would have been pre-reformation.

This turned out to be one of a small group of wood mice that have recently moved in from the graveyard to the cool of the church. Although carbohydrate pickings are small indoors (regular cleaning – and parishioners who leave few cake crumbs – take care of that), there is plenty of protein in the form of insects (beetles, moths), woodlice and spiders for a young family of wood mice to enjoy, along with holes and tunnels behind panelling and the organ, and, importantly, and unlike the churchyard, no cats.

We talked about wood mice (and bank voles) in an [earlier blog](#), when I wrote that it was house mice we more often (although not **very** often) encountered inside the church. But wood mice will make themselves at home indoors too, especially in quieter, emptier buildings where they are unlikely to be disturbed, so an old rural church is probably a *des res* for this upwardly mobile family.



Although there was some concern about hygiene, and one suggestion of employing a cat, the response of most present was amusement and (following a sermon about generosity) agreement that finding a new home for this family the best approach for all. So we've been live trapping and translocating them to an outside area, some way from the church, where we think they will be equally happy.

I suspect that, despite the sermon, there would have been less fellow-feeling towards a family of rats. Very occasionally (and mainly in the lower churchyard, which backs onto a railway line and has a stream) we see brown rats, also known as Norwegian rats (*Rattus norvegicus*). The Norwegian reference seems to be based on an 18<sup>th</sup> century misunderstanding. At the time, brown rats were new in Britain<sup>1</sup>, having first appeared around 1730, and nobody knew where they had

<sup>1</sup> The 'original' rat was the black rat – *Rattus* – of plague fame. Itself originating in Asia, it's now near-extinct in Britain, having been replaced by brown rats, and is found mainly in hot rural areas of India and Africa.

## May: Of mice (and rats) and men

come from. The British naturalist who gave them their scientific name thought they had arrived on Norwegian timber ships, although some people think he simply got confused with lemmings. Anyhow the Norwegian bit stuck.

It's now clear that they originated in northern China and, possibly following the Silk Road, moved across Asia, arriving in Europe in the 1530s, displacing the smaller black rats as they went. Once in Europe, they travelled the world by ship, and brown rats are now found wherever there are people, leaving food and making homes for them, particularly in big cities.

Although brown rats clearly like us humans very much, we tend not to return the love and there is something about them which really upsets many of us. Of course this is a cultural, learned response, not an innate one – many people keep pet rats, and in parts of Asia rats symbolise wisdom, prosperity and intellect. And at the [Karni Mata](#) temple in Rajasthan, black rats are revered.

Some say our dislike is because of rats' naked tails, others cite their association with diseases such as plague (although the link between black rats and plague is only about 120 years old) but I'm not sure. I wonder if it's not simply because we and rats are so similar? We both live in communities, sometimes overcrowded. We both make friends, who we will travel to see. We are wary, but curious, of both strangers and new things. Sometimes things boil over, of course, and we get into fights. However, we also love to play, and we giggle when tickled. We enjoy and nod our heads to rhythmic music. We also help and look after each other, sharing food and other resources, communicate through chatter and even lie (what animal behaviourists call 'tactical deception'). We will eat just about anything, and we are intelligent and adaptable but opt for an easy life whenever possible - and so are prone to obesity. We both have social hierarchies in which those at the bottom starve first, get ill first and have shorter life spans. Also like humans, brown rats are responsible for wiping out native species wherever they go, often by eating them but sometimes by simply destroying their habitats or eating their food. I'm not aware of rats raging war or taking slaves<sup>2</sup>, however.

---

<sup>2</sup> [Naked mole rats](#) however...