Flora and fauna at the Bank of England

By Jennifer Adam, Curator of the Bank of England Museum.

An exhibition at the Bank of England Museum explores the surprising menagerie that can be found adorning the Bank's buildings and banknotes.

The City of London can be seen as the quintessential urban environment — a centre of business and commerce rather than somewhere that one would expect to find inspiration from the natural world. Yet within the Square Mile there are a surprising number of green spaces, with the Bank's own Garden Court providing one such unexpected oasis. Moreover, there is a menagerie of sorts inside the Threadneedle Street building itself: from the lions that guard the Bank's gates and can be seen on the mosaic floor in its entrance hall (**Figure 1**) to the bees — historically a symbol of industry and co-operation — which adorned banknotes throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (**Figure 2**), these creatures reveal important aspects of the Bank's image and ethos over the centuries. Indeed Bank officials might even find themselves discussed in avian terms: are they a dove or a hawk? Or perhaps even an owl?

This article provides an overview of some of the themes featured in the Bank of England Museum's Spring 2015 exhibition, Flora and Fauna.(1) The exhibition examines the symbolic meaning of plants and animals that appear within the design of the Bank building, on banknotes and in depictions of the Bank over the years. It will also look at a number of real-life creatures that have contributed to life at the Bank. This display will provide an opportunity to see aspects of the Bank's architecture not generally accessible to the public, as well as artworks and artefacts not usually on display.

Figure 1 Lion mosaic at the Bank's Entrance Hall.

Figure 2 Vignette of Britannia that featured on banknotes in 1855; beehive to the left.

Symbols of safety and soundness

Despite initial impressions, today's Bank of England is actually a relatively modern building, designed and built between 1925 and 1939 by the architect Sir Herbert Baker, who was assisted in the decoration of the Bank by the sculptor Sir Charles Wheeler. Wheeler's scheme echoed the Neo-Classical themes that Baker's predecessors, including Sir John Soane,(2) had brought to the original Bank of England buildings, while bringing to the project his own distinctly modern style of classicism. The Bank's decoration

(1) *Flora and Fauna at the Bank of England* will be open on the 23 March 2015 and run until Autumn 2015. The Bank of England Museum is open 10:00–17:00 on weekdays (see the Bank's website for special opening hours). Admission is free of charge.
(2) Sir John Soane, one of the most distinguished architects of 18th century London, was Architect and Surveyor of the Bank of England between 1788 and 1833. His tenure at the Bank of England was one of his most important roles, which he called 'the pride and boast of my life.'

Figure 3 Threadneedle Street, main door.

Figure 4 Test print for the 1957 £5 note.

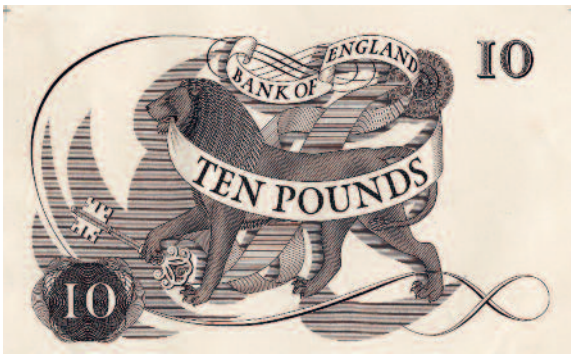

Figure 5 Test print for the 1964 £10 note.

follows the tradition of using design as a way of symbolically warding off bad spirits, in order to inspire the visitor with confidence in the strength and integrity of the institution.

Inspiring confidence

One of the first sights to greet visitors to the Bank are the magnificent sculpted lions adorning its great bronze doors (**Figure 3**). Wheeler's lions guard each of the portals into the Bank, on Threadneedle Street, Princes Street, Bartholomew Lane, and the two gates on Lothbury. Such lions are part of an ancient artistic tradition: they invoke the awe of the onlooker, conjuring the strength of these mighty beasts to defend a place and ward off evil intent. Their frequent depictions around the Bank, sculpted on doorways, handles, railings and decorative relief, echo ancient depictions of lions as protectors of treasure. Indeed the mosaic floor of the Bank's entrance lobby, designed by Russian artist Boris Anrep,(1) copies the form of the lions that guarded the gates of the ancient Greek city of Mycenae, with two lions standing either side of a single column (**Figure 1**). As symbols of strength, nobility and integrity they lend their power to protect not only the Bank's buildings but also its banknotes, appearing on banknote designs from the 1950s and 1960s. That said, some depictions are more imposing than others: the symbolism of a mighty lion holding the keys to the Bank on the 1957 £5 note (**Figure 4**) is quite clear, whereas his counterpart on the 1964 £10 note looks almost friendly (**Figure 5**). As well as lions, a number of other fierce creatures feature within the Bank's walls. The Court Room was originally designed by architect Sir Robert Taylor in the 1760s and features griffins and snakes which serve a similar apotropaic function (that of warding off evil or bad luck), with several copied from designs from ancient Greece and Rome. Snakes also appear in the form of the caduceus (**Figure 6**), a sacred attribute of the Roman god Mercury, known not only as the deity of messengers, but also of commerce and trade.

As well as using images of imposing beasts to ward off evil intent, Classical art and architecture also made use of plant designs as a way of conveying positive attributes such as solidity, integrity

(1) Anrep also designed mosaic floors that can be seen at the National Gallery, Tate Britain and Westminster Cathedral.

Figure 6 Caduceus design on Court Room ceiling.

Figure 7 Mosaic borders of laurel leaves, on the ground floor of the Bank's Threadneedle Street building.

and virtue. Sir John Soane continued this tradition in his designs for the Bank during the peak of the Neo-Classical revival of the 1700s and 1800s, a tradition further honoured by Sir Herbert Baker's artists and craftsmen in the decoration of the new Bank in the 1930s. Anrep's mosaics include designs relating to banking and finance surrounded by borders of laurel (see **Figure 7**) olive, and oak. These draw on ancient associations of victory and peace (laurel), wisdom (olive) and solidity and strength (oak). By combining the grandeur of this decoration with the dramatic scale of the Bank's building, Baker and his designers created a sense of permanence and authority within the fabric of the institution itself.

Reflecting the Bank's remit to serve the public good

While attributes of security, reliability and permanence remain important to the image of any central bank, the Bank of England's public service remit is also reflected in aspects of design around the building. Animals add a symbolic element to a portrait in the Bank's Parlours(1) (**Figure 8**), of William Paterson, whose scheme formed the basis for the Bank of England's foundation in 1694. Below the portrait is a relief of a pelican feeding her young: the pelican was thought to feed its offspring with its own blood, thereby becoming a symbol of self-sacrifice and the service of others. This sentiment is underscored by Paterson's motto — '*sic vos non vobis*' — which comes from a verse attributed to the Roman poet Virgil, conjuring the image of bees working for the benefit of others, not themselves: '*sic vos non vobis mellificatis apes*', 'thus not for yourself do you bees make honey'.

Indeed bees appear as a symbol more than once. In 1855 the Bank began issuing notes featuring a new vignette of Britannia(2) designed by Daniel Maclise. In Maclise's vignette (**Figure 2**), the pile of coins that Britannia was guarding in the first version of the Bank's seal has morphed into the form of a domed beehive. In this case bees appear as a symbol of industriousness and co-operation — values which the Bank sought to emphasise in 1855, and that remain important today.

Comment and satire

So far, the plants and animals discussed here have been symbols that, in one way or another, the Bank has adopted for itself. But what of depictions made by others? Financial markets are sometimes characterised as 'bulls' or 'bears', and entire economies might be described as 'dragons' or 'tigers'. For the Bank, some of the most striking — and comic — commentary consists of representations of its leading officials in animal form, with Bank figures particularly scrutinised for

(1) The Bank's Parlours can be seen on a small number of open days each year. In 2015 these will be 4 and 11 July and 19 and 20 September. Please see the Bank's website for further information.
(2) Britannia, a female allegorical figure representing Britain, was adopted as the Bank's symbol and seal by the Bank's first Court of Directors in July 1694

Figure 8 Bust of William Paterson in the Bank's Parlours; the pelican is below the bust.

'dovish' or 'hawkish' outlooks on monetary policy.(1) When asked by the *Yorkshire Post* as to whether she saw herself as a dove or hawk, Deputy Governor Minouche Shafik looked to broaden the options: 'I asked my children this question and they said, 'Mummy, you should say you're an owl….' Look at the data, try and be wise.'(2) The avian metaphors were extended further in the November 2014 *Inflation Report* press briefing when Governor Mark Carney was asked whether he was perhaps a loon(3) — referring, of course, to the water bird that appears on Canadian dollar coins (**Figure 9**).

Though not so recent, one of the sharpest such commentaries can be seen in a 1998 cartoon by Richard Cole,(4) with the nine members of the MPC each characterised as a different creature, from doves and hawks to squawking parrots. Then-Governor Eddie George is shown as the owl at the centre (**Figure 10**). Such creatures of satire must take their own place within the Bank's menagerie.

Figure 9 Canadian 'loonie' dollar. *Courtesy of the Currency Museum, Bank of Canada*.

Figure 10 Richard Cole, 'Make your mind up time? That's strictly for the birds.' *Reproduced courtesy of Richard Cole.*

(1) Commentators use the term 'hawk' to describe a policymaker that places a tighter focus on maintaining low inflation as the top priority for monetary policy. By contrast, a 'dove' puts a relatively greater weight on other factors such as the outlook for unemployment, when making their policy decisions.
(2) Interview with the *Yorkshire Post*, 25 September 2014: www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/business/business-news/exclusive-bank-of-england-won-t-risk-recovery-says-minouche-1-6859496.
(3) The Governor was asked if he was a loon at the 12 November 2014 *Inflation Report* press conference — see for example this *Times* article: www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/business/industries/banking/article4266105.ece.
(4) This cartoon was originally published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1998. The original artwork appeared in the Bank of England Museum's exhibition 'Cartoons and Caricatures' (May–December 2013). See 'The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street', *Bank of England Quarterly Bulletin*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pages 137–46, available at www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Documents/quarterlybulletin/2013/qb130205.pdf.

Figure 11 GE Hicks, 'Dividend Day at the Bank of England'.

Working plants and animals

As well as their symbolic uses, animal and plants have had a very real role in serving (and protecting) the Bank. In the painting 'Dividend Day at the Bank of England' by George Elgar Hicks, the presence of a terrier and a cat might intrigue — but were actually a form of 19th century vermin control (**Figure 11**). Watchdogs and carriage hounds are common features in paintings and engravings of the Bank throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Dogs still play an active role in maintaining protection and security in the area, although these days this responsibility falls to the City of London Police, with the specialist dog section assisting in searches for explosives or drugs, for instance. There has also been an association with the City of London Police Mounted Unit: in 2006 one of its horses was named Ariel, after the sculpture of the same name above the Bank's Tivoli Corner.(1)

There is also an association between the plant world and the security of currency that reaches beyond pure symbolism and into practical design. In the 18th century, printers in New Jersey experimented with forms from the natural world, copying the unique patterns of leaf veins in the hope that they could provide an inimitable security feature (**Figure 12**). Though they eventually proved possible to forge, the move towards complex printed forms was an important step in protecting currency against counterfeiting. This would develop into the complex mechanical guilloche patterns that have appeared on later note designs.(2) In the 20th century, designers also used complex plant-inspired banknote designs to confound counterfeiters by including deliberate errors. The flowers of the 1957 £5 note contain secret marks specifically used by Bank clerks to

(1) This sculpture by Sir Charles Wheeler is above the Princes St-Lothbury corner of the Bank. It became known as Ariel after the 'Spirit of the Air' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and was conceived of by the sculptor as representing the dynamic spirit of the Bank carrying credit and trust around the world.

(2) A complex pattern of intersecting curved lines used to protect against forgery, created using a machine called a geometric lathe. The patterns created in this way are a more complex form of the designs that can be made using a children's toy called a spirograph.

Figure 12 New Jersey banknote, with leaf design. *Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum*.

Figure 13 Secret marks on the 1957 £5 note.

identify forgeries: counterfeiters might omit a seemingly random dot (**Figure 13**) or mistakenly continue an apparently broken line without realising that these would be the marks that would reveal their forgery. In fact, the very material used for Bank of England banknotes — paper made from a special cotton-linen blend — is itself a plant product. The combination of banknote material and inks create a unique feel which has long been a key way to verify authenticity and protect against counterfeiting.(1) Flora and fauna will again feature on banknotes with the issue of the new polymer £10 in 2017 featuring Jane Austen, the design of which includes horses and deer in the grounds of Godmersham Park.

The Bank's Garden Court

In common with many such green spaces within the City of London the Bank's Garden Court is actually the site of a former churchyard. When the Bank moved to Threadneedle Street in 1734, the site immediately to the west of the building had been occupied by the Church of St Christopher le Stocks since medieval times. It had been one of the first churches to be rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren following the Great Fire of 1666.

Wren's Church was marked for demolition in 1781, when the Bank expanded westwards and acquired the site. Yet it was a condition of the Act of Parliament that allowed for the demolition of the church that the churchyard could not be built over, and so the new west wing of the Bank of England, completed by Sir Robert Taylor in 1785, enclosed the old churchyard within the Bank's site as a new 'Garden Court'. So it remained until Sir Herbert Baker rebuilt the Bank in the 1920s: while Baker retained the notion of a garden courtyard, its location was shifted slightly to the east, to the central north-south axis of the new building. Garden Court thereby remained in name, but in reality this meant the deconsecration of the churchyard, exhumation of several burials which had remained in situ(2) and the removal of the great imposing lime tree standing at the centre of the courtyard. The Bank's Collections include a number of objects carved from the wood of the lime tree after it had been felled, including a book bound within two lime-wood covers.

Today's Garden Court is visible to visitors arriving at the Bank, through the windows of the Threadneedle Street lobby (**Figure 14**). The four mulberry trees in the courtyard allude to the earliest paper money, produced in China in the 7th century and printed on paper made of beaten mulberry bark (**Figure 15**). Yet the planting is practical as well as symbolic: the horizontal root structure of the mulberry allows the trees to grow safely above the Bank's vaults.

(1) Information about modern day banknote security measures can be found on the Bank's website, at www.bankofengland.co.uk/banknotes/Pages/current/default.aspx.
(2) Once the remaining graves in the Garden Court had been exhumed, the remains of the deceased were moved to Nunhead Cemetery and either reinterred, or placed in the crypt.

Figure 14 The Bank's Garden Court today.

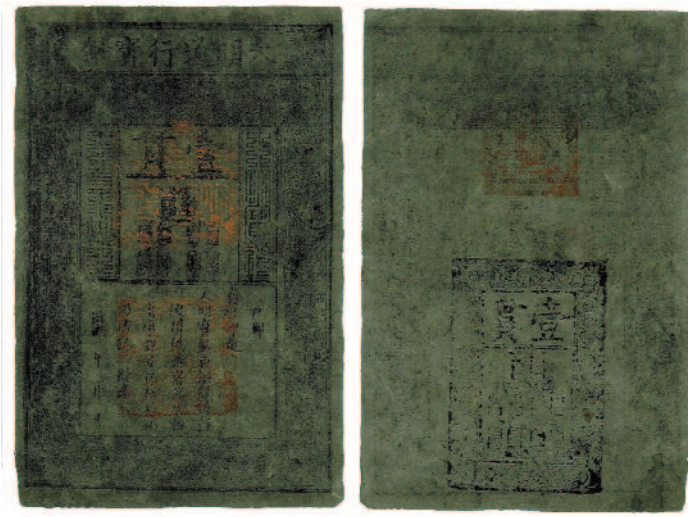

Figure 15 Early Chinese banknote (Ming dynasty, 14th century), from the Bank's collections.

The quietude of the Garden Court creates a haven for wildlife: it has recently provided a home for nesting pairs of a rare bird species: black redstarts. These birds favour stony ground for their nests, and although they thrived in the city during the post-war period when there were many suitable urban nesting sites, they are now a protected species, with fewer nesting pairs in the United Kingdom than there are of ospreys or golden eagles. London provides important habitat for the birds, with up to a third of their British population thought to be nesting in the capital. Black redstarts found a welcoming home in the Garden Court, and their distinctive call has also been heard in the streets and avenues between Moorgate and Old Broad Street.

The breadth of material within this exhibition reveals an unexpectedly rich array inspired by the natural world. A diverse menagerie can be found within the Bank's walls if one looks closely, with creatures great and small in both real and symbolic form. This latest exhibition will open on the 23 March 2015 at the Bank of England Museum. Admission is free of charge, but visitors are reminded: please do not feed the animals!