

“No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as sources of human danger, or thought of them only to dismiss the idea of life upon them as impossible or improbable. It is curious to recall some of the mental habits of those departed days. At most terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise. Yet across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.”

Many of you may recognize this famous opening paragraph from H. G Wells ‘War of the Worlds’. For many this epic opening will be memorable because they watched the BBC series adaptation in the November/December of last year. If you have seen or read any of the adaptations of this classic tale then you will know of its ability to intrigue and entertain. If you are unfamiliar with ‘War of the Worlds’ then stop reading and get hold of a copy! If you have the time and inclination then please read it; I personally find the series and film adaptations lacking in some manner.

The writer H. G. Wells lived in Basford from March to June 1888 while convalescing from illness. In his autobiography he wrote "I found... the strange landscape of the Five Towns with its blazing iron foundries, its steaming canals, its clay-whitened pot-banks and the marvelous effects of its dust and smoke-laden atmosphere, very stimulating..." "...at Etruria my real writing began..."

I'm sure he didn't get his inspiration for the Martians from the people of Basford, though he did draw upon his experiences here to inform his literature including War of the Worlds in 1898. Whilst it is always interesting to indulge in local history it is not the reason that I have reminisced at length about War of the Worlds. When I first read this book over ten years ago, it initiated and ignited a curiosity. The Martians who invade are an advanced species that use their dominance to harvest the earth. Now, whilst many of us are understandably reluctant to go down any conspiratorial route donning tin foil hats and looking for crop circles; my curiosity remains, is there life on another planet?

It would seem that my curiosity is shared by a number of others. Thankfully these others have made their curiosity their living and find themselves in a position to actually do something about it. We don't have enough time to go through all that is happening in this field but chief amongst the most recent developments is the ‘Breakthrough Listen Project’. It received \$100 million dollar funding and will work alongside SETI and listen for radio

waves in space. If you want to know more about the work of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) then there is no better place to visit than Jodrell Bank, a great day out for all.

We cannot discuss this question without turning to NASA and their work. The curiosity rover has been on Mars since 2012 but in a year from now rover 'Mars2020' will land on the surface of the red planet, only this rover has a brand new remit. It has been tasked with the explicit search for evidence of existing or pre-existing life. The rover will trundle across equatorial Jezero Crater seeking out rocks that look as though they might have been laid down in the presence of biology. The best examples will be drilled and sealed in small tubes the size of whiteboard markers. These canisters will then be placed on the surface for a later mission to pick up and take home.

Mars is not the only focus of attention. NASA is hunting for what it calls exoplanets, these are planets that fit into a slim category in which the planet is the perfect distance away from its sun and subsequently deemed likely places for life to develop. So far, within our Milky Way Galaxy NASA have identified 4126 exoplanets but this is increasing all the time. Our capabilities are such that we can only examine a very limited amount of the cosmos; it is akin to taking a bathtub of water from the ocean to examine it for life, there are still oceans of water remaining where life could be. With over 4000 known inhabitable planets in our Galaxy alone, it makes one quake to think about how many exoplanets there may be in the known 100 billion galaxies that we know populate the universe.

Whilst I personally find this enterprise compelling I appreciate that it is not shared with all my Christian brothers and sisters. Moreover, I had a rather interesting experience when I raised this subject with someone known to me. This presented a stumbling block for him and his faith. He was pouring his pessimism on to the enterprise out of hope more than conviction. I wanted to understand on what level this potential admission of life elsewhere challenged his faith. Spending time pondering this I identified two concerns. Firstly, what does it mean for our understanding of Creation and secondly, what does this mean for our understanding of Jesus and his ministry.

We do not have the space to turn to these concerns now but if this small article gathers any interest then perhaps they can be addressed in a later 'Lion'. One thing is for sure, we as Christians must be engaged and open about the possibilities of these endeavours returning positive findings. If we begin to think about these matters now then we may have an informed response to them. A fantastic place to begin this conversation is by listening to a lecture available online called 'The Dance of the Fertile Universe' by Fr. George Coyne, ex-head of the Vatican Observatory.