

## George Claridge Druce's career as a botanist

[Speech made at Blue Plaque event on 28 April 2018 at the Town Hall, Oxford]

George Claridge Druce (1850–1932) was a self-taught botanist. He was able to recognise 400 species of plants by the time he was 16, though he did not know their names. He was further inspired in botany as it was one of the subjects he took in his final pharmaceutical exams in 1872. It was at the age of 22 (in the middle of a night when he could not sleep) he made the decision to collect plants he found on his rambles and form a herbarium, so he could name the plants and record their distributions. He had the intention of writing a Flora of his native county (Northamptonshire). His first publication was on Northamptonshire plants published in the *Journal of Botany* in 1877, followed by another in the *Botanical Exchange Club Report* for 1878; forerunners to the Flora later compiled. Frank Bellamy, the Oxford astronomer, was a friend of Druce and said he was ‘a man of energy’ when he arrived in Oxford in 1879 and already experienced in field work in natural history. He was eager to acquire knowledge, make friends and publicise the botanical information he had learnt. He was in a good place to access libraries, mix with people from the academic scientific community and within easy access of the countryside.

These early beginnings led to Druce becoming the most prominent British amateur botanist of the first three decades of the twentieth century. He had an enormous influence on a large number of amateur botanists. He had ambition. Druce is well known for almost single-handedly running the Botanical Exchange Club of the British Isles from 1903. This was the forerunner to the present day Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI). He increased membership considerably. One of the ways he did this was to write to people – amateurs, professional botanists, the ‘great and the good’ – inviting them to join. However sometimes he did this a little too often and received rather curt responses, as seen in letters in the Druce archives in the Department of Plant Sciences (University of Oxford)! One of the people he invited to join the Northamptonshire Natural History Society was Charles Darwin from whom he received a courteous letter declining the invitation. On field excursions with other people Druce provided abundant and valuable botanical information and “this was enriched by his cheery mood which made the walk a pleasant one”, as Bellamy records. In this way he kept up the profile of field botany. He was always enthusiastic in helping and encouraging young people.

Apart from writing most of the yearly accounts for the Botanical Exchange Club reports, which were very voluminous, and papers and notes, Druce published several county Floras, those of Oxfordshire (1886), Berkshire (1897), Buckinghamshire (1926), Northamptonshire (1930), Zetland (Shetland) (1922) and West Ross (1929) along with two other books. These were very well received and they provided him with much desired acclaim in the academic world.

In 1895 Druce was appointed as Special Curator of the Fielding Herbarium in the Department of Botany in the University of Oxford, which was then housed within the Botanic Gardens. As a botanist he was the first person to take curation of the herbarium collections seriously in the University. During his curatorship, Druce carried out the re-arrangement of about a quarter of a million specimens including naming at least to genera those undetermined plants and those from the pre-Linnean collections. Today the collections would not be in the orderly state they are but for him. The Fielding Herbarium of worldwide plants is still in the general arrangement Druce placed it in, which made the collections useable by researchers. He also had a great interest in the holdings of historic collections. Together with Professor Vines (the Sherardian Professor of Botany) he published two books, one on the herbaria of Johan Jacob Dillenius (1907) and one on Robert Morison's collections (1914), both of whom were former Professors of Botany in the University. On his death Druce left his own herbarium and library to the University and a bequest of money, the bulk of his fortune, for curation and research on the collections. This bequest continues to make an important contribution to the maintenance of the Herbaria. The Herbarium bequeathed by Druce, consisting mostly of British plants, comprises 200,000 specimens and is one fifth of the Oxford University Herbaria's entire collection today.

For his botanical work and publications Druce received an Honorary doctorate from St Andrews University in 1919, he was made an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, and received a D.Sc. on his publications and by examination from the University of Oxford in 1924. Druce also became a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) in 1927: an amazing achievement for an amateur.

Druce's desire to find new plants to add to the list of British plants was something that was the driving force in his field work for his entire life. One of his most exceptional finds was a grass which had been sitting in the Herbarium of Dillenius for almost 200 years unnamed and unknown in Britain. He visited the locality in Somerset where Dillenius had collected it and found spikes of it, also in other localities nearby at Brean Down. He proceeded to name the species *Koeleria splendens*. He loved to be able to discover and name new varieties of plants but unfortunately most of the new names he described are not valid or current today, although it did highlight many taxa of ecological or geographical interest. His methods for naming new species were thought controversial by his 'intellectual superiors'; he did not always adhere to the generally accepted rules! He had a long running feud with James Britten, who worked at the Natural History Museum in London, as some of his new finds had been attributed to others by Britten who also had criticized Druce over his Flora of Berkshire. Even after the death of Britten, Druce still felt offended by it. After all, Druce just wanted to please people and to be thought of in a respectable light especially amongst his peers.

Druce lived through times of change in attitudes to collecting, rather than collecting plants like stamps, conservation was becoming a concern. Studies of ecology, physiology and genetics were beginning to come to the fore; they were interesting times botanically. An awareness of

disappearing prime localities and the importance of preserving habitats for future generations had struck him. A good friend of his, Charles Rothschild, who was a pioneer of nature conservation in Britain had established the first nature reserve in the UK at Wicken Fen in 1899. He possibly had an influence on Druce. Druce became a trustee of Oxfordshire's first nature reserve at Cothill, known as the Ruskin Reserve, and purchased an adjacent piece of land in 1904 known as Hurst Copse to add to it. For the last twenty years of his life he served on the council for the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves.

Druce was still writing and publishing books in his 80s. His last book, the *Comital Flora of the British Isles*, was published just a month before he died in 1932. It recorded the distribution of every British plant across the country. This work contributed greatly to knowledge of the biogeography of the British Flora. Druce told the reader he had visited all the counties of Great Britain and Ireland. He ends the preface to his book paying homage to all his friends and fellow helpers and recalling wonderful visions of habitats visited while looking for plants. He must have felt his fieldwork days were over as he ends with the words 'Hail and Farewell' written in Latin.

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