

George Claridge Druce

Oxford High Street and Town Hall, 28 April 2018

First a welcome and some thanks. We are delighted to have with us today, for this celebration of George Claridge Druce, descendants of his family; representatives of Jeyes pharmacy, where he trained; of the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire, which he refounded; of BBOWT, the local Wildlife Trust; and of other environmental and conservation bodies. We are especially grateful to the Lord Mayor of Oxford, Jean Fooks, and to Cllr Bob Price, for their hospitality and their contribution to the cost of the plaque, as well as to Lincoln College for permission to place it on one of their buildings and for installing it there through the good offices of their clerk of works, Julian Mitchell.

When I joined the Blue Plaques board six years ago, I naturally cast around for conspicuous gaps in its coverage of eminent and remarkable people who had resided in the city and county. George Claridge Druce struck me as a notable omission. Fortunately many others agreed with me; and together we began the quest to honour his memory which culminates today. Moreover, he can now claim a special centrality within the scheme: whereas it extends equally across the entire county (and Druce did justice to that in his botanizing), this plaque is actually the closest to Oxford's Carfax of all that we have yet unveiled.

Druce was born some ten miles south of Northampton in 1850. He was illegitimate; his father unrecorded. This he later sought to conceal – even to the extent of falsifying his year of birth on a university matriculation form. Yet the fact must have been an open secret in some circles: Druce always stressed his middle name of Claridge, the surname of his purported father's family. They were farm bailiffs; his mother Jane a mere servant girl.

Druce later reminisced affectionately about his early love of nature, especially in Whittlewood, the remnant of an ancient forest near Yardley Gobion where he spent most of his youth. He first noticed butterflies, then studied their food plants, and thus took up botany.

Despite his limited schooling (he afterwards said he learned most from the local Congregational minister and his son), Druce soon gained remarkable expertise. He trained as a pharmacist in Northampton with Philadelphus Jeyes (and we shall hear more about that from Ian Simpson). Meanwhile Druce began to manage local natural history activities and to compile his first county flora (as Serena Marner will tell us in the main commemorative address). By 1879 he was ready to move to Oxford and set up as a chemist on The High, at number 118.

Within the next decades Claridge Druce became a celebrity. He achieved this initially not as a botanist, though he did lay the foundations for his scientific fame by reorganizing natural history societies, curating large herbaria, both the University's and his own, and issuing his county floras. Rather Druce made his mark in two further ways.

On the one hand he ministered from his central location as purveyor of medicaments and advice to the great and good at the University, especially its *jeunesse dorée* (such students as Sir Edward Grey, another renowned naturalist-to-be). Druce was famous enough to appear under his own name in Max Beerbohm's madcap fantasy novel, *Zuleika Dobson*. As the *Oxford Mail* drily observed, 'his prescription for restoring the havoc wrought by over-indulgence brought him considerable popularity.' Is this a hitherto unregarded source for Jeeves' miraculous pick-me-up cures dispensed to the fainéant ex-student Bertie Wooster and his friends?

On the other hand, Druce entered politics. From the 1890s onwards he was returned time and again as Liberal councillor for South ward. In the end he was elected an alderman. He served as sheriff in 1896–7, and as mayor in 1900–1. More importantly he long presided over key council committees, notably those which determined policy on health, finance, and education. And he clearly loved his public role, not least all the speeches he was invited to give, as chief dinner guest of choice for every manner of Oxford society.

In 1905 Druce retired from his pharmacy premises to a spacious house on Crick Road. By now he was a rich man; evidently his skills included financial shrewdness, though bachelorhood also helped (even so, it remains a bit of a puzzle how he amassed such a personal fortune). He sustained his unending commitments, local and national, from the South Ward Allotments Association through the Church and Freemasonry to chief botanical organizer for the whole of Great Britain. Honours were piled on him, above all his election as Fellow of the Royal Society in 1927. He received so many congratulations on his eightieth birthday that Oxford Post Office had to employ extra staff to deal with them. The leading society portraitist of the day, Philip de Laszlo, was commissioned to paint a fine likeness. When Druce died in 1932 – his last public appearance had been to open Bury Knowle library in Headington – he left most of his collections and estate to the University of Oxford.

Three things in particular attract me to Druce. Firstly he was indefatigable and intrepid. Plenty of stories illustrate this. As sheriff, he beat the municipal bounds at his own expense: twenty-five miles across swamps, over hedges, and through houses, carrying the corporation mace, with fife and drum, all in a single day. Or again, on a jaunt back to Northants, at Evenley ‘I noticed in a deepish dyke of water ... some plants of *Chara hispida* [etc] ... When I was reaching over the stream to gather them my attention was called to a plant of *Daphne mezereum* ... with disastrous results to myself, for the bank gave way and I found myself floating in the water; however the ducking enabled me to gather more perfect specimens of the *Chara* than I otherwise should.’

Secondly I admire his all-embracing ambition. ‘It’s been my infinite privilege to see every species of Flowering Plant ... known to exist in the British Isles’, he reported in 1921. Not only did he compile floras for all four counties in the south Midlands – an amazing feat – but he did the same for the farthest-flung parts of Britain, Wester Ross and the Shetland Isles. His many trips to Europe and beyond and contacts with overseas colleagues are further testimony to the scope of his interests. And these were not restricted to contemporary observation:

Druce also engaged himself deeply in what he called ‘botanologia’, or the history of botanical studies. Thus he compiled a complete record of the floral landscape, past and present.

Finally Druce was not merely a great collector of plants, but also a pioneering conservator. He inspired and implemented the acquisition of the ‘Ruskin Plot’ at Cothill, a tiny piece of fen, but only the second nature reserve in the whole of England. Druce and his fellow trustee, Edward Poulton (another recent recipient of an Oxon Blue Plaque), devised strict rules to protect its flora. Later Druce became active with Charles Rothschild in founding the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves, the forerunner of today’s network of county Wildlife Trusts.

For further appreciation of Druce I now hand over to our chief speakers: Ian Simpson, of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society; and then Serena Marner, Manager of the Fielding-Druce Herbarium at the University of Oxford.

Robert Evans