

Clarence Bicknell

Note for the Friends of Hanbury Gardens

Introduction by Marcus Bicknell

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918), my great grand-uncle, was a man of letters, artist, author, traveller, botanist, archaeologist, pastor, humanist, Esperantist, and founder of the Museo Biblioteca Bicknell in Bordighera. Clarence is renowned today for his pioneering work on the prehistoric rock engravings of the Maritime Alps, but in fact it was his interest in botany that took him to the Valle delle Meraviglie (now the Vallée des Merveilles) and Val Fontanalba.

The objectives of the Clarence Bicknell Association, of which I am Chairman, are, firstly, to celebrate and disseminate the work of Clarence Bicknell with seminars, information centres and publications aimed not only at scholars and experts but also the general public, and, secondly, to encourage further research related to Bicknell and his work by students or experts. An initial focus of the Association's activities is to prepare a commemoration in 1918 of the centenary of Clarence Bicknell's death, including a video portrait and the first biography of Bicknell. The biography is being researched and written by the author Valerie Browne Lester, who is descended from Clarence's maternal grandparents and from his cousin Hablot Knight Browne, better known as 'Phiz', illustrator of Charles Dickens' books.



Our website www.clarencebicknell.com in English, French, Italian and Esperanto is updated frequently with new research, features on life in Clarence's time, transcripts of his diaries and other works, a news blogs, copious images and other downloads. The Association is dedicated to transparency and to sharing research findings with other researchers and groups.

We are pleased that the Bicknell family has maintained its links with the Hanbury family for over 100 years and I welcome warmly the Friends of Hanbury Gardens to the Garrick Club today.

Clarence Bicknell and Botany by Graham Avery

I continue with an overview of Clarence Bicknell's botanical activity, completed by a list (in Annex) of articles on this subject published on the website of the Clarence Bicknell Association of which I am Vice-Chairman.

Soon after he settled in Bordighera in 1878, Clarence began excursions in the surrounding area where he collected flowers, took them home to dry as herbarium specimens, and recorded them in water-colours paintings. He also explored the nearby mountains: in 1881 he made an excursion to the Meraviglie, and in 1888 he began visits to the Valle di Pesio where San Bartolomeo was his base for botanical excursions.

Clarence's book *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera and neighbouring mountains* (London, 1885) included 82 coloured plates from his paintings, and notes on 280 species (at right, *Crocus* spp. Plate LXV). In the Preface he commented that many of the plants of the coast and adjacent mountains 'are now to be found no more, and many others are becoming extremely scarce, owing to the ravages committed by horticulturalists' agents and winter visitors... Every autumn, too... a new road or villa or vineyard has caused the disappearance of some favourite old friends'.

Later he published *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo, or a catalogue of the wild plants growing in western Liguria, in the area bounded by the outer watersheds of the Arma and Nervia torrents* (Bordighera, 1896). In the Preface he wrote 'There is no part of this district which may not be visited by a good walker, with the assistance of a carriage, within a day's excursion, and by an early start one may be among the larches, the gentians and the Edelweiss on a summer morning, and in the evening gather Oleander and *Pancreatum* near the sea. It would be difficult to find another region of equal size with a richer or more varied flora'. The *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*, a work of reference without illustrations, included an appendix with the local names of flowers, which was unusual for a botanical work of that period. Clarence wrote 'the popular names... seem to be dying out, as so few of the younger generation now work in the country and it is not easy to find those older peasants who remember the names they learned as children'. He recorded names such as 'Perfetto amore' for *Delphinium ajacis* (Larkspur in English), 'Bruttore' for *Stella media* (Chickweed), Batticristi for *Carlina* (Carlina thistle), and 'Rogna' for *Urtica urens* (Stinging nettle).



It was botany that brought Clarence to the mountains and the rock art of the Meraviglie (at left, Clarence on the rocks of the *Chiappes de Fontanalba*). In his Preface to *The prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (Bordighera, 1902) he wrote 'I am only an amateur botanist, and have gone up into these neighbouring mountains in my summer holidays in order to study their Flora; but the fascination of the rocks has made me neglect my special hobby; and I have spent the greater part of my time in making drawings and taking notes of the rock figures'. 'I wrote [in July 1897] to the Secretary of the Italian Alpine Club for information about the works already published on the

Meraviglie, and he referred me to Dr Fritz Mader, an Associate who had a thorough knowledge of the Maritime Alps and who spent his summers in Tenda. It was then, through the full and courteous reply to a letter that I wrote to Dr Mader that we first heard of there being inscriptions in the valley near us, and we immediately went up to search for ourselves’.

Who was this person who launched Clarence on the path to archaeological discovery? Fritz Mader (1872-1915?) was a botanist, alpinist and speleologist. Son of the Lutheran pastor in Nice, he studied at the Lycée in Nice, the Gymnasium in Heilbronn, and at Leipzig University where his doctoral thesis was on the geology, climate, glaciers and vegetation of the Maritime and Ligurian Alps. Later he worked in Leipzig for Baedeker, the publisher of guidebooks. Mader returned frequently to stay with his parents at their summer home, Villa Alpina in Tende, from where he explored the surrounding mountains. Villa Alpina, which was confiscated by the Italian authorities during the First War, is now the Mairie de Tende.

Clarence’s experience as a botanist contributed to his work as an archaeologist. His predecessors had focussed on speculative theories about the origin of the rock engravings, attributing them to Phoenicians or Carthaginians. But botanists do not interpret flowers, they describe them. It was Clarence’s meticulous drawing, photographing, recording, listing, classifying and publishing of the rock-figures that helped to bring them out of the obscurity of antiquarian speculation into the light of scientific investigation.

Clarence’s most important botanical friendship was with Emile Burnat (1828-1920), whose monumental *Flore des Alpes Maritimes*, published in Geneva from 1892 onwards, has many citations of Bicknell. We know from the Visitors Book of Casa Fontanalba, Clarence’s summer home at Casterino, that Emile Burnat, Reginald Farrer, H. Stuart Thomson, Henri Correvon, and other botanists visited him there.

Although Clarence was not a friend of Sir Thomas Hanbury (1832-1907), he collaborated with Alwin Berger (1871-1931) who was Curator of the Hanbury Gardens from 1897 to 1914 (at right, Alwin Berger in 1906). In *Further explorations in the regions of the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (Bordighera, 1903) Clarence recorded that in 1902 in Val Fontanalba he ‘escorted Dr Fritz Mader of Nice, the author of the excellent German Guide to the Maritime Alps, and Herr Alwyn Berger, curator of Sir Thomas Hanbury’s garden at La Mortola, to a little beyond Lago Verde’.



Berger, for his part, appreciated Clarence’s botanical expertise. In *Hortus Mortolensis: Alphabetical catalogue of plants growing in the garden of the late Sir Thomas Hanbury* (London, 1912) Berger expressed his ‘thanks to those who have given me their kind assistance in compiling this Catalogue, especially to Mr. James Britten, F.L.S., Mr. Clarence Bicknell, M.A., of Bordighera, and to Mr. Alban Voigt, of Dresden’. He stated that ‘the Western and Southern Mediterranean plants were contributed by Miss Willmott, Mr. C. Bicknell of Bordighera and M. Henri Correvon of Geneva’, and his Catalogue included 18 citations of Clarence’s botanical publications.

In October 1912 the Società Botanica Italiana held a congress in Genova with meetings in the Istituto Botanico Hanbury, and a visit to Hanbury Gardens led by Alwin Berger in which Clarence Bicknell and Fritz Mader took part. According to the Society’s Bulletin ‘il 21 ebbe luogo la visita al Giardino Hanbury alla Mortola (Ventimiglia) intervenendovi i soci

Beguinet, Bicknell, Cortesi, Penzig, Traverso, il Segretario Pampanini, ed alcuni altri botanici : Mader, Mameli, ecc. Con la guida del Direttore del Giardino, Sig. A. Berger, i visitatori poterono ammirare il superbo Giardino e in special modo le magnifiche collezioni di piante grasse, delle quali il sig. Berger, ben noto per i suoi lavori su di esse, si occupa in particolar modo. Agli intervenuti lady Hanbury gentilmente offri una colazione’.

Many of Clarence’s herbarium specimens are conserved at the Museo Bicknell and the University of Genova, to which he bequeathed much of his collection. The Herbarium Mortolense of Hanbury Gardens has ‘plants gathered by Clarence Bicknell in Val Roya, neighbouring valleys, and the Cuneo area (Val Vermenagna and Val Pesio)’. As a result of Clarence’s participation in botanical exchange networks, specimens collected by him are conserved in many other places; my research suggests that his specimens are to be found in at least 21 herbaria in Europe and the USA. While we know much about the botanical exchange networks that operated in the British Isles in the nineteenth century, less is known of the exchange networks of continental Europe. With further research, more remains to be discovered about the botanical work of Clarence Bicknell and his contemporaries.

Annex

Clarence Bicknell and Botany - Articles published on the Association’s website

General information

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=145&lang=en

Biographical note on Clarence Bicknell by Augusto Béguinet (1931)

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/beguinet_article_on_clarence_bicknell_note_avery_jan2015.pdf

Clarence Bicknell’s meeting with Reginald Farrer (1910)

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/obh12_avery_bicknell_and_farrer_v4.pdf

Clarence Bicknell’s correspondence with Emile Burnat (1886-1917)

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/burnat_letters_from_bicknell.pdf

Clarence Bicknell’s Botanical Exchanges

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/clarence_bicknell_botanical_exchanges_avery.pdf

Herbarium specimens and other material from Clarence Bicknell at Kew Gardens, London

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/kew_clarence_bicknell_avery.pdf

Herbarium specimens from Clarence Bicknell at Oxford Herbaria

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/oxford_herbaria_clarence_bicknell.pdf

Herbarium specimens from Clarence Bicknell at Belgium’s Botanic Garden

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/belgium_bicknell_avery.pdf

Clarence Bicknell and *Iridomyrmex bicknelli*

http://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/iridomyrmex_bicknelli_avery.pdf