

Science in the Archive:

Algernon Sidney Bicknell

Here is our next science in the archive blog

By Emma Johnson

Feb 9, 2016

According to his obituary in the Sussex Express, Algernon Sidney Bicknell (1832-1911) who resided at Barcombe House, Lewes, had a wonderfully varied life. He served as a soldier during the Franco-Prussian war and travelled the world; he attempted to cross the Amazon and succeeded in climbing Mount Vesuvius ten times. The obituary notes that Algernon inherited two great passions from his parents; those of science and art. Indeed, it was believed that his father Elhanan, who was a great patron of art, was one of the first men to discover and encourage the great landscape artist, J.M.W. Turner. In his later years, Algernon turned his attention to science and astronomy. He was one of the oldest Fellows of the Royal Astronomical, Linnean and Geographical Societies.



Here at The Keep in the care of the East Sussex Record Office are some beautiful [handwritten autobiographical notes](#) of Algernon's life. They also include local newspaper cuttings and publications written by Bicknell and his family members.

As well as astronomy, Algernon was also interested in fungological botany and issued a pamphlet on the value of certain fungi. Here is an extract from his 'Notes on the edible fungi of Italy':

'I think there may yet be corners of the fungological domain where greater light may fall and one of these I hope to show. In every science there is a department strictly scientific, usually abstruse, and there is generally another in which all with average observant faculties may, as it were, stroll and render services. In fungology it has certainly always been so. For years the popular statements concerning fungi, with their terrors and their superstitions, were almost all we had to read, and as fungological studies assumed their proper botanical position through our better knowledge of structure and classification, fascinated by scientific discoveries, we somewhat neglected to rectify the popular beliefs of our forefathers; the wondrous stories of hecatombs of poisoned families still circulated, ill contradicted, in the autumn papers, and the credulous public still today believe that a couple of grammes of any toadstool for breakfast, will be followed by delirium, coma and death, which no injection of stramonium or of atropine can avert... It struck me then that it would not be wholly waste of time if I were to revise the hallowed statements concerning the sale and commercial value of fungi in Italy, and correct to modern date the antique and omnivorous assertions of the enthusiastic Badham. I propose to tell you what

species are at present authorised by law to be sold in the public markets of the great cities of the peninsula; what species I have seen in them; and inasmuch as what has been said concerning these edible Italian fungi rests almost exclusively on the text of Vittadini...’

Bicknell’s writing oozes enthusiasm- it is very clear that he was fascinated by fungological botany and that he was intent on refuting the misconceptions about fungi. We came across these wonderful books detailing Algernon Bicknell’s incredible life on the off chance. That is the beauty of archives; sometimes you find the most interesting things when you are not directly looking for them.



[http://www.thekeep.info/science-in-the-archive-
algernon-sidney-bicknell/](http://www.thekeep.info/science-in-the-archive-
algernon-sidney-bicknell/)

- **Title:** Papers of Algernon Sidney Bicknell (1832-1911), antiquarian, connoisseur and traveller, latterly of Barcombe House
- **Date:** 1832-2015
- **Repository:** East Sussex Record Office
- **ESRO reference:** ACC 8490
- **Level:** Fonds
- **Description:** Autobiographical notes and genealogical papers of Algernon Sidney Bicknell, antiquarian, connoisseur and traveller. Bicknell was the son of Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861), businessman and patron of the arts. In 1857 he married Rosa Louisa (1840-1913), daughter of William Wild of Denmark Hill.
- **Creator(s):** Algernon Sidney Bicknell (1832-1911), antiquarian, connoisseur and traveller.
- **Biography:** Algernon Sidney Bicknell, antiquarian, connoisseur and traveller, was the son of Elhanan Bicknell (1788-1861), businessman and patron of the arts. In 1857 he married Rosa Louisa (1840-1913), daughter of William Wild of Denmark Hill.
- **Administrative history:** Purchased by private treaty; other parts of the archive have been retained by the family or sold to Park Farm Antiques (notes for the history of Biconylle of Somerset), The Royal Geographical Society (diary of tours in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Crimea, Russia, Sweden and Denmark, 1887-1888) and The British Library (manuscript journals of John Bax of the Bombay Civil Service, d1863)
- **Custodial History:** Purchased by private treaty; other parts of the archive have been retained by the family or sold to Park Farm Antiques (notes for the history of Biconylle of Somerset), The Royal Geographical Society (diary of tours in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Crimea, Russia, Sweden and Denmark, 1887-1888) and The British Library (manuscript journals of John Bax of the Bombay Civil Service, d1863)
- **Access status:** Open
- **Extent:** 0.5