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Development and Status of the Royal Institution of South Wales

Herbarium at Swansea Museum

The Herbarium collection now in the possession of the Museum of the Royal Institution of South Wales comprises an interesting amalgamation of plant specimens, the earliest of which dates from about 1798, and spans a time period of up to about 1915. Many of the specimens are of local origin, although the rest of the British Isles are also fully represented and is augmented by a few European specimens. The mixed collection of about 2,500 specimens is not really as haphazard as it would first appear, and is at the present time in the process of being catalogued and reorganised.

In one of the first Museum Reports of the (then) Swansea Philosophical and Literary Institution (1836), regarding Botany, it was stated that "... the Museum as yet only possess a small but neatly arranged collection of mosses, found in the neighbourhood of Swansea"; these remain in the collection to the present. The already eminent Botanist, L. W. Dillwyn, was President of the Society and members included names such as M. Moggridge and J. W. G. Gutch.

In 1837, J. W. G. Gutch, a surgeon, became the Honorary Secretary of the Society, and from 1838 (when the Society became the Royal Institution of South Wales), also became the Honorary Curator of Botany. During this time he was preparing the basis for a flora of the South Wales area. In 1838-39 he donated a collection of "100 British Plants collected in the neighbourhood of Swansea". Of this first collection donated to the Herbarium of the Museum only forty or so remain (or at least, remain traceable). Several of the plants are listed in this 1844 paper; however, some plants appearing in the collection are not listed, but are labelled as being local.

The largest part of the collection in the possession of the Museum is the Motley-Bicheno Herbarium, comprising about 1,600 specimens. Apparently, this represents two collections which are now largely inseparable. Most of the specimens are in a sorry state, and after almost two hundred years many remain unmounted. The J. E. Bicheno donation to the Museum in 1839-40 was described as a "very extensive collection of Phanerogamous plants of Great Britain", with "numerous foreign specimens illustrative of the various genera", it was finally noted that in the "very valuable collection will be found many of our rarest plants". Mr. Bicheno was a magistrate living locally, and later became a Colonial Secretary in Hobart, though he retained Honorary Membership of the Institution. James Motley's contribution of plants, collected mainly in Glamorgan and Carmarthenshire, was supposed to have been made around 1840 (see R.I.S.W. Rep., 1902-03 and Carter, 1955) though a more direct record of this appears to be lacking. Possibly, also now included in the collection are a donation of 55 specimens from the Cheltenham and Malvern area from M. Moggridge, Honorary Curator of Botany from about 1841, and a much later addition by a Mrs. Fisher of 35 "chiefly local" plants. Among J. E. Bicheno's collection there are specimens provided by many famous and eminent botanists of the day including Joseph Woods, "Mr. Borrer", G. S. Gibson, C. C. Babington, Charles Prentice, G. Don, O. A. Moore, Leo H. Grindon, etc. as well as specimens from the many personal friends of Messrs. Motley and Bicheno, and probably also members of the Institution.

The next donation noted in the literature was that of "many valuable specimens of algae" from a Miss Watkins of Llandovery in 1902-1903 and, although unidentifiable by name, it is probably largely this collection that remains in the herbarium, rather than those presented by a Mr. Ralfs of Penzance, during a visit to Swansea where he collected from Mumbles "20 British algae and 18 British Fuci".

There are also several species of Chara which form part of the Bicheno collection.

The Reverend H. J. Riddelsdell moved to the Glamorgan area in 1897. He was chiefly based at Aberdare and Llandaff as the Sub-Warden of St. Michael's Theological College, though he was a frequent visitor to the R.I.S.W. where he examined the contents of the Motely-Bicheno Herbarium and eventually produced a paper, dealing with the "North of England plants in the Bicheno Herbarium in Swansea" (1902-1903). In the report that this appeared, the Honorary Secretary remarked on the desirability that a Botanist should "properly arrange" the specimens and to "look them over from time to time". It was the further desire of the Institution to repair the ravages of time wreaked on the Herbarium by replacement and extension of the existing collection. Riddelsdell became Honorary Curator of Botany in 1904, and in 1909 he presented his own collection of about 200 plants gathered between 1902-1907 to the R.I.S.W. Riddelsdell published 'A Flora of Glamorgan' in 1907; the principal districts in the paper are represented in the collection.

The report of the Honorary Curator of Botany (1912) stated that the Rev. Riddelsdell had been unable to complete his work of re-arranging and supplementing the Herbarium and that the collection required "overhauling". H. R. Wakefield was an active member of the Swansea Field Naturalists' Society from about 1908 onwards; not only an excellent botanist, but also a renowned entomologist, he occupied the Honorary Curatorships of both Botany and Entomology for some years. Much of the ground work for his collection was probably covered during the many forays and rambles of the Society in Glamorgan, especially in the Swansea area during the period 1910-1915. It was his ardent desire to see published a flora of the Swansea region. J. A. Webb (1924) attributed many of the 10,000 records in the Phanerogamic report to the pioneer work of Mr. Wakefield and his daughter Miss E. Wakefield. Wakefield left Swansea in 1936 after forty five years membership and participation within the R.I.S.W., and deposited with the Museum his collection of beautifully mounted botanical specimens.

It is an interesting historical note that each of the donations to the Museum of the Royal Institution has been directed towards the fulfilment of a complete botanical record of the locality for the benefit both of R.I.S.W. members and visitors, and though the collections are separable in time-span, quality and in the donors themselves, they are inexorably linked together by this one thread of continuity.

The Council of the Royal Institution of South Wales in 1838 were confidently expectant that "eventually, the herbarium and botanical catalogue of the Institution will form a very prominent feature in the Museum and Library", and thus provide a valuable basis for the botanical investigations of visitors to the locality.

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