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## Thomas Algernon Chapman, “The Doctor”: The Life and Times of a Forgotten Entomologist

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### **Abstract**

Hereford Museum Resource & Learning Centre holds a small collection of coleoptera and a slightly larger collection of Lepidoptera donated by Thomas Algernon Chapman in 1894. Other than the collector name and knowing Chapman was a doctor, no other collector information was apparent so, in addition to the above, I aimed to find out something about the donor of the material. This paper outlines a project to assess the condition and quality of the coleoptera specimens and to determine the circumstances in which it was collected and donated, hopefully providing the collection with some hitherto unknown context.

### **Introduction**

The Chapman coleoptera collection is made up of twelve drawers of beetles (Fig.1) from all over the world, most of them originating from South America (approximately 900 specimens). The collection was systematically examined noting condition of specimens and highlighting areas that needed attention. Occasional verdigris was noticed but otherwise the specimens were well preserved. The specimen labels are all handwritten, with many abbreviations of localities, and outdated location names. The information written on the labels was fragmentary and quite general (e.g. Bavaria or Brazil as the location). In order to get a better grip on the collection it was essential that I investigate the collector. Using the internet, the library and Herefordshire Archive Service, over several months a fairly comprehensive account of his life, as well as his associations with various institutions in the UK, was gathered.



**Fig. 1.** Some of Chapman's beetles with their associated handwritten labels (© Herefordshire Heritage Services).

### **His Life & Work**

Dr. T. A. Chapman was born in Glasgow on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1842. He studied medicine at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, eventually becoming the resident physician of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. His father (also Thomas Chapman) was a member of the Glasgow Natural History Society and began his son's life-long fascination for entomology. Chapman moved to Abergavenny and worked in the Joint Counties Asylum in 1866 before relocating to Hereford in 1871 as the Medical Superintendent of Burghill Asylum.

While he was here he was a member of the Woolhope Club, becoming its president in 1876. He retired in 1895 and moved to Reigate, Surrey until he died in 1921. Chapman chose to retire there so that he could be close to the natural history institutions in London he was a member of, such as The Royal Society and the Royal Entomology Society (of which he was vice-president and turned down the offer of presidency). He was also a committee member of the Holmesdale Natural History Club in Reigate.

Throughout his life he dedicated his spare time to scientific research in the field of entomology, concentrating mainly on lepidoptera, and was a regular contributor to The Entomologist's Record (TER). He is most remembered for his work on Lycaenidae and their development, discovering the relationship between larvae of the Large Blue (*Phengaris arion*) and the ant, *Myrmica sabuleti*, among others (TER, 1951); he was instrumental in investigating melanism in British lepidoptera (Fig. 2), as discussed by J. W. Tutt, a friend of Chapman and someone he worked closely with (TER, 1891); and he wrote a thorough article about the genus, *Acronicta* (TER, 1890). He died in 1921 and was survived by two sisters (he never married).

Chapman was a generous man and keen to help his peers; he supported Hereford Museum and, as the president of the Woolhope Club, instructed others to make collecting and donating to the museum a priority. He has even been referred to as rivalling Darwin himself in some ways, as pointed out in his obituary in The Entomologist (Sheldon, 1922):

"...a busy stream of ants we passed on the path attracted his attention; then it would be the burrow of a trap-door spider in a sandy bank; the cryptic attitude of a mantis; or some striking peculiarity in the structure of a flower: about all of these and others he would point something of absorbing interest; to him all nature was an open book. I remember wondering if even Darwin could have been more interesting and instructive!"

### Other Institutions

Most of the information discovered about the life and collections of Chapman came from visiting other institutions. Since Chapman was born, studied and worked in Glasgow, Maggie Riley and Geoff Hancock at the Hunterian Museum (part of the university Chapman attended) were contacted, who confirmed that they have specimens collected by him. Geoff warned me that their specimens lacked comprehensive labels: this seemed to be a characteristic of Chapman's collections. Chapman's obituary mentions that he used anything he collected for research (Sheldon, 1922). As a result most of what he collected was destroyed in the process, or given away to other researchers; this may explain the lack of good quality information. Approximately 20 entomological store-boxes are held at the Hunterian Museum (Glasgow) (Fig. 3). It provided an ideal opportunity to compare that collection to Hereford's: I looked at the labels (even less informative than ours), methods of storage and the paper records. The main problem was that we were unable to say for certain whether the specimens were connected to Thomas Algernon Chapman or his father, Thomas Chapman. Geoff then discovered that the Hope Entomological Collections at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (OUMNH) have some specimens and correspondence relating to Chapman; the visit to the Hunterian had provided some new information, and a new lead.

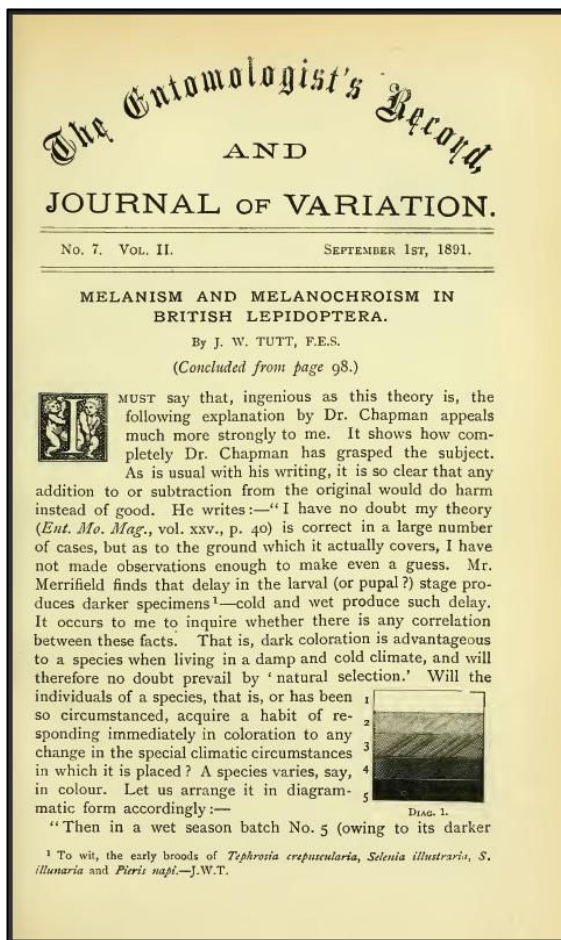
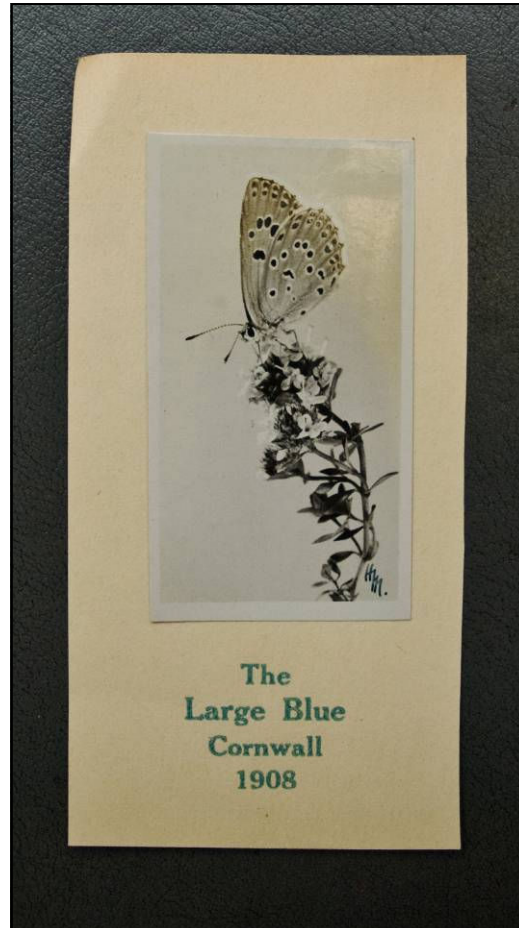


Fig. 2. The first page of the "Melanism and Melanochroism in British Lepidoptera" article written by J. W. Tutt featuring Chapman's work (image reproduced with permission from The Entomologist's Record).

The library at the Natural History Museum, (NHM), London holds seven boxes of macro photographs and illustrations of lepidoptera that Chapman had commissioned and made notes on (Fig. 4). The material from the library was beautiful and very interesting, giving further insight into Chapman, his work and his habits. A visit is planned later in the year to visit and view Chapman's specimens.



**Fig. 3.** An insect store-box from the Hunterian in Glasgow holding some of Chapman's coleoptera specimens (© of The Hunterian Museum, Glasgow).



**Fig. 4.** One of the photographs in the Chapman collection. Chapman was famous for researching this species and discovering its relationship with a species of ant (© the Natural History Museum, London).

The Holmesdale Natural History Club (HNHC), in Reigate, Surrey also holds a small number of specimens that may be linked to Chapman. A selection of Lycaenidae, including a Large Blue (Fig. 5), were seen, but the labels were typed or written in a different hand as Hereford's. Two of the volunteers (Carol and Viviane) had very kindly gone through the minutes and bookmarked any mentions of Chapman, including some instances of his own handwriting. A few more details about his life came to light but nothing regarding his collections.

The Hope Entomological Collections at the OUMNH have a collection of correspondence between Chapman and John Obadiah Westwood and specimens listed as material Chapman collected and named. These were photographed and although nothing of note has come to light, they are yet to be investigated fully.

**Summary**

There is still work to be done in investigating some of the material (e.g. from OUMNH and Herefordshire Archive Service) which may suggest other institutions to ask or new routes of enquiry. The absolute importance of Hereford’s Chapman collection is unknown as yet but the information about Chapman reveals a pioneering and highly regarded entomologist with links all over the UK and this alone elevates the collection significantly. Once the material has been looked through and institutions like the NHM visited further, new insights into the specimens may come to light. At the very least, Dr. Thomas Algernon Chapman was an eminent gentleman in the field of entomology, well respected and knowledgeable; Herefordshire Heritage Services is privileged to count his material as one of its earliest donations. The above findings have been added to an online report: <http://prezi.com/yjerl4vnqu7i/thomas-algernon-chapman/>



**Fig. 5.** Lepidoptera specimens at HNHC, including the Large Blue (© Holmesdale Natural History Club).

**Acknowledgements**

The twelve-month traineeship has taken me through the natural history collections of Ludlow and Hereford museums as I have been learning the skills required to be a natural history curator. The year so far has involved a variety of tasks and training courses from all areas of natural history curation, as well as visits to other museums. Without the HLF *Skills for the Future* traineeship, I would have been unable to undertake this project. I would like to thank Geoff and Maggie at the Hunterian in Glasgow, the library at the NHM, Carol and Viviane at the Holmesdale Natural History Club and Amoret Spooner and Katherine Santry at the OUMNH for giving me their time and access to their collections. I am grateful to the traineeship and Hereford and Ludlow Museums for giving me the opportunity to undertake this project, especially seeing as it has taken me around the country and to see some amazing collections.

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