

GEORGE STABLER (1839-1910)

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This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content.

A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists is also available on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Bryological career

Like his friend Richard Spruce, Stabler was particularly interested in liverworts; he added *Marsupella stableri* and *Plagiochila exigua* to the British bryoflora. In addition, Stabler first reported *Anastrophyllum hellerianum* as a British species after it had been found by John Michie, a former pupil of his, who had become Commissioner (Factor) for the royal estate at Balmoral, Aberdeenshire. Stabler visited Michie in 1884 and 1894 and refound *A. hellerianum*, as well as *A. donnianum*, *A. saxicola* (second British record), *Lophozia longiflora* and *Marsupella stableri* (both first Scottish records).

Stabler was a close friend of his Levens neighbour James Martindale Barnes (1814-1890), who collected mosses and edited W.J. Linton's *Ferns of the English Lake District* (2nd edition, 1878). Another botanical friend and neighbour of Stabler's was the lichenologist Joseph Anthony Martindale (1837-1914), who was a witness at Stabler's wedding in 1869. The three men botanised regularly in the English Lake District, Furness and Amounderness. They would spend a weekend at each others' houses, with a long botanical ramble on the Saturday, followed by evenings reviewing their spoil. Stabler and Martindale walked from Staveley (where Martindale lived) to Mardale (Stabler's favourite valley), collect plants and then walk back. They also visited more distant ground, for example Mallerstang, Wild Boar Fell, and Warcop. Stabler and Martindale botanised on the Isle of Man in 1873, and Stabler visited Wales in 1883.

Stabler collected bryophytes mainly from the late 1860s (coinciding with Spruce's return to England) until the late 1880s, by which time his eyesight was troubling him. His catalogued herbarium of c.7,000 specimens is at Kendal Museum, together with two bound volumes containing the specimens referred to in Stabler's papers on 'The Hepaticae and Musci of Westmorland', published in *The Naturalist* in the 1880s and 1890s. The museum at the Department of Botany, Manchester University also has several hundred of Stabler's liverworts, some of which probably came from the herbaria of Richard Spruce and Benjamin Carrington.

Stabler botanised on occasions with Richard Spruce, Robert Braithwaite, William Henry Pearson, and Charles Herbert Binstead, and provided Pearson and Braithwaite with

specimens for illustration in their publications. He corresponded with Richard Spruce, Benjamin Carrington, William Wilson, Robert Braithwaite, Matthew Slater, William Henry Pearson, Sextus Otto Lindberg and Carl Warnstorf. Some of his letters are in the William Wilson correspondence at the Natural History Museum in London, and the museum at Manchester University's Department of Botany has three letters from Stabler in the Carrington correspondence.



George Stabler, c.1873, with pupils from his school.

Family background and biography

George Stabler was born on September 3rd 1839 at Crayke (or Craike), which was then in County Durham but now lies in North Yorkshire. He was a son of James Stabler (1813/4-1893) and Elizabeth (*née* Jefferson, 1815-8). James Stabler was a shoemaker, and born in Crayke. Elizabeth came from Henderskelfe, Yorkshire. The young family moved to Welburn by 1842, after which James and Elizabeth had two daughters: Hannah (1842-1917), and Mary (1845-1924) who in 1880 married her neighbour Tom Gray Beilby.

George was taught at Welburn by Richard Spruce (c.1782-1851), father of Richard Spruce the botanist, as well as for brief periods by Richard the son. George and Spruce junior subsequently became close friends after Spruce returned to England from South America in the 1860s, and Spruce helped Stabler with his hepatological studies by providing many named specimens.

After training at St. John's College, York, George became a schoolmaster at Levens in Westmorland from 1860 until 1899, and where he also passed his retirement. His sister Hannah came with him to Levens, first to act as his housekeeper, and subsequently became mistress of the infants' school from 1869 until retiring in 1906.

George married Sarah Wilson (1847-1923) in 1869. Sarah was born in Levens, daughter of Margaret Wilson and an untraced father. Sarah's paternal grandfather was John Wilson, who farmed 110 acres in 1851 and was also victualler of the Royal Oak Inn in Levens. Sarah taught at the infants' school in Levens for a while in the 1860s before leaving work to marry George.

George and Sarah had five children: James (1870-1873), Harold (1872-1945), Edgar (1874-1958), Oswald (1875-1956) and Bertha Elizabeth (1878-1917). Harold Stabler trained in woodwork and art, and became a prominent artistic designer. He married the sculptress Phoebe Gertrude McCleish (died 1955, sister of the textile and ceramic designer Minnie McCleish) in 1906. However, of George and Sarah's five children only Edgar, who became a pharmacist and married Mabel May Whitby, had a child – Phyllis (1909-1978). Oswald was a highway superintendent and sanitary inspector in 1901. He became a civil engineer and road surveyor, but returned from the Great War mentally scarred and became increasingly eccentric. He did not marry. Both Oswald and Edgar were very keen naturalists, and well informed on both flora and fauna. Bertha died unmarried in 1917.

George Stabler's health concerned him as early as 1874, when he was in a "weak state of health". By 1881, the sight in his right eye was bothering him, and in May 1895 he sustained a serious accident to his left eye, which necessitated its removal a week later. His incapacity led to the appointment of an assistant master at the school, and in December 1899 he became obliged to retire following development of iritis in his right eye. Stabler's loss of sight in later life also prevented him from pursuing his bryological interests. He became totally blind for the last two years of his life, "groping pathetically about the roads near his home, unable to see the growing plants he loved so well".

Stabler died at Levens on January 4th 1910.

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Bibliography

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