

JAMES ALFRED WHELDON (1862-1924)

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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/>

Botanical career

James Alfred Wheldon was a chemist and an accomplished field-bryologist, with a family background in trading textiles. An environment in which either medicines or textiles are important appears to favour an amateur interest in botany, and both medicine and textiles figured large in Wheldon's life.

His father James was a good botanist and ornithologist, and father and son explored together, looking for flowers and birds (and collecting their eggs), and afterwards writing a diary of what they had seen. On occasions they spent three weeks in the neighbourhood of Hawnby, selling goods from a caravan, and in their spare time ranging the moors to study natural history.

Wheldon took up bryology (along with flowering plants, insects, and snails) in his youth. In adulthood, he not only studied bryology, but also seaweeds, lichens, fungi, vascular plants, butterflies and moths, molluscs, and vertebrates.

He joined the Moss Exchange Club at its foundation in 1896, and became a referee for the Club in 1914. He took great interest in difficult groups of mosses, particularly *Sphagnum* and falcate pleurocarps (called 'Harpidioid Hypna' in Wheldon's day).

Wheldon compiled a *York Catalogue of British Mosses* in 1888, and with Albert Wilson (who was also a chemist as well as a keen amateur botanist) wrote *Flora of West Lancashire* (1907). He also wrote many notes and articles for botanical periodicals; the earliest of these on bryophytes appeared in the *Journal of Botany* in 1898.

Prior to 1890, he collected mainly in his home county of Yorkshire. After moving to Lancashire, he collected enthusiastically around his new home and by the coast, including Llandudno and the Great Orme in north-east Wales. From 1898 to 1904, Wheldon botanised mainly in Cheshire and south and west Lancashire, as he prepared the *Flora* with Wilson. From 1905 and particularly for the following ten years he started to explore much further afield, visiting north Wales, the Isle of Man, the Lake District, and Argyll, Perthshire, Banffshire and Easternness in Scotland.

His herbarium (which amounted to over 33,000 collections by the end of his life, of which about 17,000 were mosses and 5,000 were liverworts) and letters are at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales in Cardiff, with additional material in the Natural History Museum in London. Liverpool Museum has 20 of his packets, with further material at Bolton.

Family background and biography

James Alfred Wheldon was born in Northallerton, Yorkshire on May 26th 1862, the second of nine children of James Wheldon (1835-1898), master draper, and Mary (*née* Jaques, 1834-1893). Mary was a daughter of John Jaques (1797->1861), innkeeper and blacksmith, and Elizabeth (*née* Appleton, c.1803-1866). Mary was living alone in 1851, aged 16 or 17, and working as an apprentice dressmaker. James senior and Mary are buried in St. Gregory's churchyard, Bedale, Yorkshire.

James Wheldon (James Alfred's father) was a son of James Wheldon (1803-1889), draper, and Elizabeth (*née* Langtoft (1804-1875)). James Wheldon senior was a son of Robert Wheldon (born c.1780) and Mary *née* Morrill.

James and Mary married in 1858, and their children were Annie Elizabeth (1859-1873), then James Alfred, followed by John William (born 1864), George Herbert (born 1866), Robert Ernest (1871-1904), Lucie Annie (born 1875), Walter Octavius (1877-1966) and Frederick Thomas (1880-1960). John and Robert were both drapers' assistants in 1891, and Walter also became a draper. George was a grocer in 1901.

In 1861, the family was living in West Row, Northallerton. By 1871 they had moved to South Parade, Northallerton, just along from James Wheldon senior and his wife Elizabeth, and a George Wheldon, draper, who was probably a brother of James Wheldon senior. In 1881, there were three separate households of Wheldons in Station Road, Northallerton, all working in the business of drapery.

James Alfred Wheldon was educated at Cleveland College, Darlington, and examined in pharmacy at Westminster College of Pharmacy in London. His name appears in the Pharmaceutical Register for the first time in 1884, and after periods as a chemist's assistant at Scarborough and Brighton, he settled to practice on his own account at York in 1886, and married Catherine Simpson (1865-1915) in 1887. Catherine was a daughter of William Simpson (1828-1872, a farmer and innkeeper) and Margaret (*née* Webster, 1828-1880). Catherine was a founding member of the Liverpool Botanical Society; indeed, the LBS originated following a discussion in her drawing room. James and Catherine had three children: Harold James (1888-1945), William Alfred (1889-1947), and Doris Mary (1891-1967).

After six years working in York, Wheldon lost everything in a disastrous fire at his business premises on New Year's Eve. The building was gutted, and he lost a fine

collection of birds and animals that he had stuffed, together with a large aviary and his library and plants. He also had an extensive collection of butterflies and moths, birds' eggs, and later one of British land and freshwater snails. He collected seaweeds while living near the coast at Scarborough and Brighton, and also collected micro-fungi, which provided many records for Masee and Crossland's Yorkshire Fungus Flora, and for Groves's *British Rust Fungi*.

After the fire, James, Catherine and their children moved to 32 Langham Street, Oldham Road, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, where Doris Mary was born. Thereafter the family moved to Liverpool where James became pharmacist at H.M. Prison, Walton for 30 years before retiring in 1921/2. A story persists within the family that Wheldon was also required to examine the bodies of executed prisoners and pronounce them dead. Their first home in Liverpool was 9, Chelsea Road, Walton Vale, Aintree, but by 1896 they had moved to 60, Hornby Road, Walton, where JAW's father James died of cardiac insufficiency in 1898.

From the time of the fire and his move to Liverpool, Wheldon's interest in botany (and particularly bryology) took precedence over other aspects of natural history. He checked old collections in local herbaria, as well as doing much fieldwork himself, and the results were published in *Journal of Botany*. In 1899 he met Albert Wilson, and the two friends spent much of their spare time recording for their *Flora of West Lancashire* (1907). Wheldon also wrote a paper on 'The North of England Harpidia' that was published in *Naturalist* (1902), followed in 1921 by a "Key to the Harpidioid Hypna" in *Naturalist*. He also became expert in the genus *Sphagnum*, and in 1915 wrote 'A Synopsis of the European Sphagna, indicating the species, varieties and forms occurring in the British Isles, with descriptions of many of the forms'. Not content with taxonomy, Wheldon also studied the ecology of bryophytes, and wrote 'Social Groups and Adaptive Characters in the Bryophyta' (*Lancashire Naturalist*, 1911), and the 1907 *Flora of West Lancashire* also has a chapter entitled 'Ecological Survey of the Distribution of the Mosses, Hepatics and Lichens'.

Having become expert in bryology, Wheldon then took up lichens (with W.G. Travis he compiled 'Lichens of South Lancashire' which was published in the *Journal of the Linnaean Society* in 1915), and with Albert Wilson wrote an article on 'Lichens of Perthshire' which appeared in *Journal of Botany* (1915). Towards the end of his life, he also prepared a paper on the lichens of the Isle of Man.

Latterly, Wheldon also became very interested in fungi.

Wheldon died of abdominal cancer, aged 62, at his home, 26 Marchfield Road, Orrell Park, Liverpool on November 28th 1924, and was buried in Walton Park cemetery, Liverpool.

By 1911, all three of James's and Catherine's children had left school and were working, but lived at home with their parents. Harold James (1888-1945) was a draper's clerk and was studying for his examinations in accountancy. William was employed as clerk to a

provisions merchant, and Doris was a shorthand typist. By 1915, when Catherine died, only Doris was still living at home with James. For the last few years of his life, James lived with William and his wife Madge, first at 60 Hornby Road, and later at 26 Marchfield Road.

Harold had become a secretary by 1924, and a cost accountant working for the War Office before he died. He set up two accounting firms, one in London and the other in Florence, Italy. After leaving his parents' house at 60 Hornby Road, he moved to Rose Villa, Ryton on Dunsmore, Rugby, Warwickshire, where he had four children by his wife, Mildred Ethel (*née* Dunning, 1886-1956), who he had married in 1912. Later in the 1920s, he appears to have separated from Mildred, although Mildred did not agree to a divorce, and in 1931 he fathered a second daughter, Pauline Gwendoline (died 1988) by Winifred Louise Canney. Subsequently Harold lived with Gertrude Dunstan (1891-1975), who changed her surname to Wheldon and lived with Harold until his death. Harold lived at Thames Ditton in Surrey, and then at "Roseland", Weir Estate, Park Road, Sunbury, Middlesex.

Harold compiled a "Key to the British Agaricineae" (1914) and "A Fungus Flora of Lancashire" (published in *Lancashire and Cheshire Naturalist*, 1918), but lost interest in botany after 1918. He intended to complete his father's final work on the lichens of the Isle of Man, but in the event his father's botanical friend John Wilson Hartley stepped in to do this. Harold was also keen on growing roses, an accomplished painter, played contract bridge to a high standard, and also wrote several books about cost accounting and statistical method.

William Alfred (1889-1947) married Marjorie Howard (1893-1980) in 1919. He was a storekeeper in 1914-6, a merchant buyer in 1919-20, and a commercial clerk in 1924. He spent time in Sierra Leone and Lagos, Nigeria, buying palm oil. In 1938-9 he moved with his family to Chester, where he became an accountant at the Chester lead works.

Doris Mary (1891-1967) did not marry. She spent a lot of time working as a stenographer in Yokohama, Japan, and then Shanghai in China in the 1920s and 1930s. She sent gatherings of moss from China and Japan back to her father in England, and James forwarded some of these on to H.N. Dixon, who referred to some of them in an article published in 1933. On Doris's return from China, she opened a shop with Gertrude Dunstan (see above) that specialised in the sale of Chinese silks, using her Chinese contacts. Her shop was probably in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, as she was living with Harold in Sunbury in 1931, and registered his death in 1945, after which she continued to live there with Gertrude and Harold's daughter Pamela until her own death, when she was described as a retired book-keeper.

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