

SAMUEL BREWER (c.1669-1743/48)

Mark Lawley
email: mrbyology@gmail.com

This is one in a series 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

Brewer's bryological reputation rests on a tour of North Wales which he made with Dillenius in the summer of 1726, and collections he made when he stayed on in Wales until the following year. He sent bryophytes he collected to Dillenius, who wrote them up for his *Historia Muscorum* (1741). In this way, Brewer very substantially increased contemporary knowledge of the British bryoflora.

Brewer's plants lie in the Dillanian herbarium at Oxford, with some duplicates in the Natural History Museum in London. His letters form part of the Sloane correspondence at the British Library in London, and transcriptions of a diary he kept of his Welsh tour lie at the Natural History Museum in London and at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales in Cardiff.

Family background

Samuel Brewer was baptised in Trowbridge, Wiltshire on March 18th 1669 or 1670, the fifth and youngest son of William Brewer and Abigail (*née* Strode). Samuel's paternal grandfather, William Brewer (died 1669) lived in Lullington, a few miles to the south-west of Trowbridge, from where his son (Samuel's father) William (1625/6-1707) moved to set up business in Trowbridge. By the time of Samuel's birth his father had become a very wealthy clothier – “the greatest medley clothier in England”, a Justice of the Peace, and (unusually for a clothier) a Tory. In 1673, William Brewer introduced new methods of working textiles by bringing 22 skilled Dutch artisans to Trowbridge and Bradford-on-Avon, with a further ten immigrants arriving the following year. I discuss the interesting connection between the textile industry and natural history of 17th, 18th and 19th century England in *A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* (see above).



This painting of Samuel Brewer, armiger, is in private ownership, and is likely to be of Brewer the botanist, as it dates from about 1700 and is clearly of a young man in his prime.

Samuel's mother, born Abigail Strobe (?1630-1691), was a daughter of Thomas Strobe of Shepton Mallett in Somerset, and sister to Thomas Strobe junior (?c.1626-1696) of Maperton in the same county. The Strodes had long been a prominent family of the West Country, and Thomas Strobe jr. was a lawyer and mathematician who corresponded with James Gregory, the Scottish mathematician and astronomer. Another prominent Strobe of Shepton Mallett was the royalist administrator Sir George Strobe (1583-1663).

Of Samuel's siblings, Mary was born in 1657, and another sister, Elizabeth was born in 1672. His elder brothers, Thomas (1659-1724) and William (born 1663?) inherited extensive estates when their father died in 1707. A third son, Jonathan, was born in 1666, and he too became a clothier. The Brewers had an established business in London, presumably for handling their overseas trade, and one of the sons traded as far afield as China. A fourth son, Nathaniel (born in 1668) became the family's scholar, going to

school at Winchester and thence to Balliol College at Oxford, before transferring to St. John's at Cambridge. He took holy orders and the incumbency of Keevil, east of Trowbridge, from 1702 until 1735, as well as that of North Bradley (south of Trowbridge) from 1720 to 1727.

Biography

Notwithstanding his wealth and marriage into local gentry, William Brewer remained a working tradesman made good, still socially distinct from the upper class, and he intended his sons to continue and develop the family business. So although Samuel was sufficiently well educated at school to become literate and numerate - vitally important abilities in mercantilism - like his elder brothers he did not go on to university, and acquired his botanical skills in a more *ad hoc* manner than contemporary naturalists such as Buddle, Ray and Richardson, each of whom was able to refine his approach to scholarly study at university.

Perhaps his father set Samuel as a young man to manage business connections in north-west England, for later in his life Samuel once or twice considered going to live in Manchester. In any event, by 1691 he was living or lodging at Dockray Hall near Kendal, the home of William Morland, merchant, but found time to travel from Yorkshire to London in order to meet some of the prominent naturalists of his day, and see their collections and books. He journeyed south *via* Oxford, where he spent several days with Edward Lhwyd, recently appointed keeper of the Ashmolean Museum. In London he visited Plukenet, who had a very fine herbarium, and he also went to Essex to meet John Ray and Samuel Dale.

By 1699 Samuel was living in Trowbridge again, and in that year he married Elizabeth Bennett (born 1677) at Seend in Wiltshire. Elizabeth was a daughter of James Bennett senior (c.1629-1711), a wealthy merchant of Salisbury, and Jane (*née* Drake) of Blandford, Dorset. Interestingly, one of Samuel's maternal uncles also married a Bennett girl.

Samuel and Elizabeth had one son (William) and two daughters (Abigail (1700-1768) and Elizabeth (born 1708)). Elizabeth married Joseph Morley of Trowbridge. Samuel and Elizabeth's son William was christened in Trowbridge on December 29th, 1701. As a young man he caused Samuel concern when he returned from the Indies, having been dismissed from service. William Brewer, "gentleman of Trowbridge" died there in 1766. One of Samuel's daughters also caused him much worry in the 1730s through her "undutifulness".

In 1707, on his father's death, Samuel inherited part of the family business, together with materials of trade and £150. However, the will stipulated that "a considerable sum of money" which Samuel had borrowed from his father was to be offset against the £150, should the loan still be outstanding when William died.

The following year, Samuel was described as a clothier of Trowbridge, and in 1714 he was well enough regarded by other clothiers to represent them at the Houses of Parliament in their opposition to a bill.

By 1726, aged 57, Brewer seems to have retired from active participation in business, and in that year he embarked on a botanical tour with Dillenius. Armed with botanical directions (which Richard Richardson had sent to Dillenius) for places to visit in North Wales, their route from Berkshire and Trowbridge in early July lay over the Mendips to Bristol, then north through Gloucestershire and Worcestershire to Shropshire. There they met Littleton Brown at Bishop's Castle, who rode with them into Wales by Newtown, on to Llanidloes and thence to Dolgellau, from where they ascended Cader Idris. Brown left them at that point, and Brewer and Dillenius struck north to Caernarfon, from where they visited Anglesey and the mountains of Snowdonia.

Dillenius thought very highly of Brewer as a botanist, writing to Linnaeus in 1727 that "...I shall never meet with a better searcher, especially for mosses. When we travelled together in Wales in all the badness and violence of weather and rain he would stop and pick up mosses." A little later Dillenius told Linnaeus that Brewer had "a particular genius for plants, and had he been a scholar, he would have done great things."

Brewer stayed on at Bangor after Dillenius left in the autumn, and he spent much of the winter and following year collecting cryptogams and other plants from the country around Bangor, including Anglesey and the Snowdonian hills, frequently botanising with two other botanists, the Reverend William Green and William Jones. Jones lived at Llanfaethlu, Anglesey. William Green (died 1782) was the son of Jeremiah Green of Dublin and Ann (*née* Williams), daughter of William Williams, who owned Castellmai near Caernarfon. William Green was curate of Bodedern, Anglesey in 1725-6, and subsequently became rector of Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd.

Brewer periodically sent parcels of the plants he collected to Dillenius, and these gatherings are now in the Dillenian herbarium at Oxford, with some duplicates at the Natural History Museum in London. It seems that Dillenius received Brewer's Welsh plants in return for naming them and the right to retain part of each gathering. However, Dillenius did not return the residue to Brewer as agreed, and this caused a breach between the two men which was not repaired until 1741. Brewer must eventually have repossessed some of his material, as he sent two parcels of Welsh plants to Sir Hans Sloane in 1731 and 1732. These are presumably those now in the Sloane herbarium at the Natural History Museum in London. Unfortunately, nearly all of Brewer's bryophytes are undated and unlocalised.

Brewer quit Wales in 1727 and went to stay with Richard Richardson at North Bierley in Yorkshire, after which he took lodgings in Bingley, near Bradford, before moving back to live near Richardson at Bierley for the rest of his life.

The years 1727-33 seem to have been bad for Brewer. Apart from the vexations of rheumatism, and others caused by the wayward behaviour of his son and daughter, he

was “barred from estates” by an elder brother, and suffered business losses by fire and bad debts arising from a partner’s actions, losing £20,000 which he had earned “by the sweat of his braines”.

Although Samuel appeared to live without a spouse in later years, I have been unable to discover when his wife Elizabeth died. By the late 1730s, he might reasonably have hoped to be enjoying a comfortable retirement, while fulfilling “a strong itching to go to Craven yt is so remarkable for plants and fossils” and exploring “the neighbouring seas”. Instead, his straitened circumstances meant he had to stay at home and act as his “own cook, baker and chambermaid”. He earned some money by selling living plants from his garden and advising the Duke of Beaufort about his garden at Badminton, and was also reduced to accepting gifts or payment in kind from botanical friends such as Richardson and Sir Hans Sloane.

Brewer is said to have died at Bierley in about 1743, and buried at Cleckheaton Chapel. However, the chapel’s register of burials for December 1748 states ‘Decembr Samuel Brewer of North Bryierly Bradford Psh 1st’. A Samuel Brewer was also buried in Wiltshire on February 13th 1748. I have yet to locate a will, or administration for his estate, but an administration bond was granted within the Archdeaconry of Wiltshire in the name of Samuel Brewer with the place name of Colerne mentioned in the index entry for this record (ref: P3/B/1458). These records may of course refer to more than one individual named Samuel Brewer.