

THOMAS BARKER (1838-1907)

Mark Lawley

email: mrbyology@gmail.com

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

Barker joined the Moss Exchange Club in 1896 and remained a member until his death. He contributed ... to the exchange. He found *Grimmia arenaria* in Wales in 1898, and also studied microscopic forms of freshwater algae, particularly during his visits to Scotland.

His herbarium is at Manchester Museum, and the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff has 145 of his specimens that were collected from 1871 onwards. Liverpool Museum also has 20 of Barker's packets, and some of his plants are at Oxford.

Family background and biography

Thomas Barker was born at Aberdeen in 1838, the son of Thomas Barker (c.1772-1858), a farmer of Murcar, Balgonie, near Aberdeen, and Margaret (*née* Knowles). Three other children of the marriage died young.

Thomas junior attended the grammar school in Aberdeen, and then King's College, Aberdeen, from where he graduated in 1857. Barker displayed aptitude for mathematics early in his education, and entered Trinity College, Cambridge in 1858, becoming a foundation scholar in 1860, Sheepshanks astronomical exhibitor in 1861, and senior wrangler and first Smith's prizeman in 1862. He was elected a fellow of Trinity, and appointed assistant tutor.

Barker's time at Cambridge coincided with that of Sir James Stirling (1836-1916), who was also born in Aberdeen and shared Barker's predilections for mathematics and botany, and became a lawyer, judge, and member of the Moss Exchange Club. The two men remained lifelong friends. Twenty years later, another bryologist with a bent for mathematics – Henry Herbert Knight – went up to Cambridge.

In 1865 Barker left Cambridge, never to return, and moved to Manchester, where he was appointed professor of pure mathematics at Owens College (now part of Manchester

University), a post he held for twenty years. In mathematics he followed Boole and De Morgan's interests, and influenced several students who went on to distinguished mathematical careers: John Hopkinson (electrical engineer), the physicists John Henry Poynting and Arthur Schuster, Sir Joseph John Thompson (who later discovered electrons and invented mass spectrometry), A.E. Steinthal, and J.W. Capstick.

In 1871, Barker lived at 3 Heaton Road, Withington, Lancashire. He remained a bachelor, and by 1881 had moved to "Don Bank", Alexandra Road, Withington, where he lived with two unmarried cousins, Margaret Ann Knowles (1846/7-1924) who kept house for him, and Sarah Knowles (born 1855) who taught at an elementary school. They were daughters of his mother's brother, Charles Knowles (born 1806/7), who became a gardener and moved south to Surrey.

Barker retired in 1885, aged about 47, having made a modest fortune from investments, and taking an Emeritus professorship. Careful and neat in his habits, he went to live in close and tranquil retirement at "Overlea", Whaley Bridge in Derbyshire, an existence varied only by rare excursions and occasional visits from a few friends. He was still at Whaley Bridge in 1901, but later moved to "Woodlea", Lightwood Road, Fairfield, Buxton, where he died on November 20th, 1907. He was buried in the southern cemetery in Manchester. He left about £40,000 to Manchester University, to found a professorship of cryptogamic botany, and bursaries and scholarships for the encouragement of able students of slender means in the departments of mathematics and botany.