

RICHARD DE GYLPYN BENSON (1856-1904)

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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/>

Family background

Between them, Benson's ancestors boast varied accomplishments, and at least eight of them are deemed worthy of accounts in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. His father, Richard Brownlow Benson (1831-1914) married Elizabeth Barbara Gilpin (1831-1917) in 1855. They had four sons – Richard, Edwin Bernard (1858-1940), Sawrey Brownlow (1861-1918), and Francis Charles Jeffreys (1863-1878). Edwin was an unmarried district superintendent and lecturer at a school for the United Kingdom Alliance (a temperance movement) at Torquay in 1901. Sawrey became a priest, like many of his forebears.

Benson's father, Richard senior, qualified as a physician and practised for a while in Harley Street, London, but a spinal complaint compelled his retirement in the late 1850s, and he spent the rest of his long life practising as a non-conformist minister at Church Pulverbatch in Shropshire, where his grandfather-in-law had formerly been rector, and where some of his wife's family continued to reside. Richard and Elizabeth's two younger sons – Sawrey and Francis - were both born at Pulverbatch.

Richard Brownlow Benson was a son of Reverend John Benson (1783-1860), rector of Norton-sub-Hamden in Somerset, and Frances (*née* Gilpin, 1794-1865). John Benson was a son of Joseph Benson (1749-1821), who was born at Melmerby in Cumbria, where his father John (died 1769) was a landowner. The many blood-links between the families of Benson, Gilpin, Sawrey and Farish arise because long ago they all lived in the far north-west of England. Indeed, the spelling of Richard de Gylpyn Benson's middle name alludes to his distant ancestor Richard de Gylpyn ("Richard the Rider") who was granted the 4,000 acre manor of Kentmere, and who slew the last wild boar in Westmorland during the reign of King John.

On Richard's mother's side of the family, Elizabeth Barbara Gilpin was a daughter of the Reverend Bernard Gilpin (1803-1871), non-conformist minister of Bengeo, Hertford, and Henrietta (*née* Jeffreys, 1807-1841). Bernard Gilpin was a younger brother of Frances Gilpin who married John Benson; their parents were the Reverend William Gilpin (1757-1848), who was rector of Church Pulverbatch for 42 years, and Elizabeth Barbara (*née*

Farish, 1760-1832). Thus, Richard de Gylpyn Benson had the same great-grandparents on both his mother's and father's side of the family. Elizabeth Farish was sister to William Farish (1759-1837), professor of chemistry and philosophy at Cambridge. Their father was the Reverend James Farish (1714-1783), vicar of Stanwix near Carlisle, who had married Elizabeth Gilpin (born 1726), sister to Reverend William Gilpin Sr. (1724-1804).

William Gilpin (1757-1848) was William Gilpin's (1724-1804) son. Gilpin senior was a well known exponent of the picturesque during the Enlightenment, and a highly respected schoolmaster at Cheam, Surrey from 1750 until 1777. Thereafter, he became vicar of Boldre, Hampshire. He wrote a number of books, including *A Dialogue upon the Gardens of the Right Honorable the Lord Viscount Cobham at Stowe* (1748), *The Life of Bernard Gilpin* (1752), *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), as well as various other books promoting the Enlightenment's "romantic" view of nature and scenery, and *Memoirs of Dr. Richard Gilpin... and of his posterity.... together with an account of the author, by himself: and a pedigree of the Gilpin family* (ed. W. Jackson, 1879).

William's eldest son, John Bernard (1754-1851) became British Consul for Rhode Island (1802-1832), while his younger son William followed his father's career in becoming headmaster at Cheam, and then rector at Pulverbatch.

William Gilpin senior married his cousin Margaret Gilpin (1725-1807). His father was Captain John Bernard Gilpin (1701-1776), who was an accomplished amateur artist, like his own father, William Gilpin (1657-1724).

William Gilpin's (1724-1804) younger brother Sawrey Gilpin (1737-1807) became a well known professional painter of animals, and Sawrey's son, William Sawrey Gilpin (1761/2-1843) was also a prominent professional painter of landscapes, as well as a landscape gardener. He wrote a 'Tour through part of North Wales' in 1818, which was not published, unlike his later *Practical hints upon landscape gardening, with some remarks on domestic architecture, as connected with scenery* (1832; 2nd edition 1835).

The Gilpins' connection with art resurfaced four generations later, when two sons of John Benson and Frances (*née* Gilpin) married daughters of the prominent artist James Bourne.

William Gilpin's (1657-1724) sister Anne (1660-1745) married the Reverend Jeremiah Sawrey of Broughton, Lancashire. He was a younger brother of John Gilpin Sawrey (died 1773).

Gilpins of the 17th and 18th centuries lived at Scaleby Castle near Carlisle, but the family's earlier seat was at Kentmere in the Lake District. William Gilpin's (1657-1724) father Richard (1625-1699) was born at Kentmere, but bought Scaleby Castle after the Restoration. Richard was a non-conformist divine who held the living of Greystoke in Cumberland until 1662, when he resigned following the Act of Uniformity, and practised medicine at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He also wrote *Demonologia Sacra*.

Richard's father, Isaac Gilpin (1590-c.1660) of Strickland, Kettle, near Kendal married Ann Tunstall, daughter of Ralph Tunstall of Coatham Mundeville, near Darlington, Co. Durham. Ralph may have descended from Cuthbert Tunstall (1474-1559), who was a close friend of Erasmus, and Bishop of Durham from 1530 until his death. Cuthbert was doubtless instrumental in furthering the clerical career of his great-nephew, Bernard Gilpin (1517-1583) of Kentmere Hall, whose nickname was 'Apostle of the North', and who was in turn great-uncle to Isaac Gilpin. Bernard's younger brother George (?1514-1602) was a prominent diplomatist and translator.

In these ways and by these means Richard de Gylpyn's forebears repeatedly intermarried, reciprocally fostered each others' clerical careers, and shared interests such as art and painting.

Biography

Richard de Gylpyn Benson was born in east London on June 25th, 1856, the eldest of four boys. He trained as a solicitor, and was "manager to [a] solicitor" in London when aged 24 at the time of the Census Return in 1881, at which time he was visiting the household of Edward Henry Gregory (c.1826-1885), merchant of Stoke Newington, London. Also in the same household was Joseph R. Benson (born 1846/7), photographer, nephew to the Gregorys, so the Bensons and Gregorys must have been related. This connection was further strengthened when Richard married Edward Gregory's daughter Elizabeth Mary (born 1862).

Richard and Elizabeth Benson had one child, Francis Alan Gregory Benson, born in 1885. However, ill health compelled Richard to retire (just as his father had before him) to Church Pulverbatch, aged 30, soon after Francis was born. Was all that marrying of cousins catching up with the Gilpin lineage?

Richard de Gylpyn Benson died at Pulverbatch on February 24th, 1904.

Bryological career

Benson took up bryology to occupy himself in retirement, and found many mosses (but no liverworts) new to the district around his home in mid-Shropshire. These included *Grimmia montana* from the Wrekin, *Hamatocaulis vernicosus* and *Orthotrichum rupestre* from the Long Mynd, *Rhabdoweisia fugax* and *Splachnum ampullaceum* from the Stiperstones, *Syntrichia princeps* from Pontesford Hill, and *Tortula wilsonii* from Pulverbatch.

He wrote a paper entitled 'Shropshire Mosses' for the *Journal of Botany* (1893), which contains an annotated check-list of all mosses then known to occur in the county. At about the same time he compiled a two-volume *List of Mosses collected in Shropshire*

which is now in the Shropshire Records and Research Centre at Shrewsbury (ref: 6001/6745-6). He also contributed many bryological records to W.P. Hamilton's account in Volume 2 of *Church Stretton. Some results of local scientific research*, which was published in 1904, the year that Benson died. In addition, Benson prepared text for the *Victoria County History of Shropshire* (1908, pages 54-55).

His bryological herbarium is at Shrewsbury Museum, and about 900 of his gatherings from Shropshire and the Welsh border went to the National Museum and Gallery of Wales at Cardiff in 1915, with further mosses at the Natural History Museum in London. Other plants are in the Biology Department at Shrewsbury School and Merseyside County Museum.

Benson also compiled a number of volumes of exsiccatae, containing dried specimens of mosses which he had collected and named himself. Extant examples are at Cardiff and Stoke Museum.

Benson joined the MEC before 1899, and remained a member until his death.