

RICHARD SPRUCE (1817-1893)

Mark Lawley
email: m.lawley@virgin.net

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

Spruce had taken up botany by the 1830s, and in 1834 produced a list of 403 species that he had found around Ganthorpe. In 1837 he drew up a list of 485 species of flowering plants of the Malton district. Spruce was an accomplished bryologist by the early 1840s, being assisted in his early bryological career by Samuel Gibson (1789/90-1849) of Hebden Bridge.

Spruce found *Myrinia pulvinata* and several other bryophytes new to Britain in and around 1841. He visited Ireland in 1842, staying with Thomas Taylor and studying his herbarium. He wrote 'Mosses of Eskdale' which was published in *Phytologist* (1844), and 'On several mosses new to the British Flora' (*Journal of Botany*, 1845).

Following a trip to the Pyrenees in 1845-6, his paper 'Musci and Hepaticae of Pyrenees' was published in 1849. His 588-page *magnum opus*, 'Hepatics of Amazon and Andes' appeared in the *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh* (1884). His *Notes of a Botanist on Amazon and Andes* was edited by Alfred Russel Wallace and published posthumously.

Spruce's plants are at Kew and the Natural History Museum in London, Glasgow, Manchester Museum (specimens from 1842) and Harvard, with letters at Kew and the Natural History Museum. His manuscript notes are at Kew and Manchester Central Library. His diaries for the years 1841-63 are at the Linnaean Society in London, and Brazilian drawings at the Royal Society of Arts.

Family background and biography

Richard Spruce was baptised on September 10th 1817 at Ganthorpe, near Terrington and Castle Howard, about 15 miles north-east of York, a son of Richard Spruce (born at Strensall in 1782; died 1851?), a schoolmaster, and Ann (*née* Etty, 1792-<1832). Richard and Ann married in November 1816 at Lund, near Beverley, Yorkshire.

Richard's paternal grandfather was also Richard Spruce. Ann Etty was related to the famous painter William Etty (1787-1849).

Richard's father (Richard) married Mary Prest (born at Terrington in 1808/9; died 1863?) at Terrington in 1832, and they presented Richard with eight half-sisters, including: Anna (born 1833), Elizabeth (1835), Sarah (1838), Mary (1840), Louisa (1848) and Harriet (1851/2). Only two of these daughters survived Richard the botanist; three died of scarlet fever in 1845.

In 1841 Richard senior and Mary lived with their family at Ganthorpe, but had moved to Welburn (six miles south-west of Malton) by the time that Louisa was born in 1848. Richard's step-mother Mary was widowed by 1861, and living with her daughters Elizabeth, Louisa and Harriet. In 1871, Louisa and Harriet were domestic servants. Louisa was an unmarried matron at an orphanage in Wharfe View, Ilkley, Yorkshire in 1901.

Richard (the botanist) followed his father into the profession of schoolmastering. He took lessons in Latin and Greek from an old schoolmaster named Langdale, and taught first at Haxby from 1839. By 1841 he was an assistant master to 28 boys at York Collegiate School, Bootham, near York, and remained there until 1844.

In 1845-6 Spruce collected plants in the Pyrenees, and in 1849 he went to South America, where he remained and collected plants until 1864.

After his return to England in 1864, Spruce was in poor health because of intestinal disease, and spent much of the rest of his life in and around his dwelling places in Yorkshire. In 1871 he was lodging in Welburn at the house of Georgiana Vause (born 1821/2) and her daughter Mary Ann Hodgson Vause (born 1851). Richard retired to head his own household at Coneysthorpe in 1876, and Mary Vause was keeping house for him in 1881 and 1891.

Richard died unmarried at Coneysthorpe on December 28th 1893, and was buried at Terrington beside his parents.