

# George Don (1764–1814)

This is one in a series of articles by **Mark Lawley** about prominent British and Irish field bryologists of the past. Mark 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 online at [www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk)

## Botanical career

George Don (senior) was the first botanist to extensively and repeatedly explore the Scottish Highlands. He lived in Angus for much of his life, but explored far and wide in the Caledonian hills, reaching as far north and west as Skye and Knoydart. As a youth, he discovered *Seligeria donniana* in Dupplin Den near Perth in the early 1780s. In 1804 he found *Encalypta alpina* on Ben Lawers. He seems to have collected mainly between 1780 and 1806, and in his native county of Angus he found – among others – the following liverworts: *Anastrophyllum donianum*, *Haplomitrium hookeri*, *Herbertus stramineus* and *Targionia hypophylla*, while his mosses from Angus include *Amblyodon dealbatus*, *Amphidium lapponicum*, *Bartramia halleriana*, *Brachythecium reflexum*, *Catocopium nigratum*, *Dicranodontium uncinatum*, *Dicranum spurium*, *Distichium inclinatum*, *Grimmia atrata*, *G. ramondii*, *Hennediella heimii*, *Hygrohypnum duriusculum*, *Isopterygiopsis pulchella*, *Kiaeria falcata*, *Meesia uliginosa*, *Neckera pumila*, *Oncophorus virens*, *Plagiopus oederianus*, *Polytrichastrum longisetum*, *Pseudocalliergon lycopodioides*, *Pterygoneurum ovatum*, *Ptilium crista-castrensis*, *Saelania glaucescens*, *Splachnum vasculosum*, *Tayloria tenuis*, *Tetraplodon angustatus* and *Tortula viridifolia*.

This would be an impressive list for a bryologist in the 21st century; for someone who

lived 200 years ago it is astonishing. Not only was travelling far slower and more arduous than today, the study of mosses was still poorly advanced, and bryologists would have had to rely on James Dickson's *Fascicularis plantarum cryptogamicarum Britanniae* (1785–1801), or James Edward Smith's accounts in *English Botany* (1790–1814). What did Don's bryological library consist of? And did he own a microscope, or just rely on very acute vision and a hand lens in the field? Contemporary cottage-weavers (of whom there were many thousands in Angus in Don's time) used a lens at their work for examining and separating fibres, so Don would have had no trouble acquiring a lens for bryological study.

Don was highly accomplished in finding and identifying lichens and vascular plants as well as bryophytes. For example, in 1789 he found *Carex saxatilis* on Ben Lomond and *Bartsia alpina* on Meall Ghaordie. In 1791 he met Robert Brown (1773–1858) of Montrose, and the two men discovered *Scirpus hudsonianus* on the Moss of Restennith, Angus. Don also found *Polygonatum verticillatum* in Perthshire and in 1793 he discovered *Carex atrofusca*, *Minuartia rubella*, *Myosotis alpestris* and *Sagina saginoides* with John Mackay (1772–1802) on Ben Lawers. In Angus, he found *Lychnis alpina* at Meikle Kilrannoch in 1795, as well as *Homogyne alpina* and *Oxytropis campestris* in Glen Clova. On

Lochnagar in 1801 he came across *Cicerbita alpina*. In the following year he discovered *Carex rariflora* above Caenlochan, and in 1810 the grass *Elymus caninus* var. *donianus*. For collecting some of these plants, Don used a pole 15 feet long, crowned with an iron straddle for hooking them down from precipitous cliffs.

In 1804, Don began to publish *Herbarium Britannicum*, issuing four fascicles of 25 plants each year. Nine such instalments were issued between 1804 and 1806, and a final one in 1812 or 1813. Extant copies are at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, and at Oxford. In 1813, Don published *Account of the Native Plants in the county of Forfar, and the Animals to be found there* in the Reverend James Headrick's *Agricultural Survey of the county of Angus*.

Some of Don's dried plants are at Montrose Museum. The single surviving volume of his private herbarium contains nearly 300 specimens of monocotyledons, and is at the Department of Botany in Oxford. Dundee University Archives contains a 13-page commonplace book *Illustrations of Scottish Flora, chiefly of Forfarshire and Fifeshire* (ref: MS 103/3/5), and two pages detailing botanical purchases.

Don's correspondence is in the National Library at Edinburgh, and his vasculum is in the Meffan Institute, West High Street, Forfar.

## Family background, biography and social contacts

George Don senior was born at Ireland Farm, Menmuir, Angus (Forfarshire) in 1764, a son of Alexander Don (1717–1813) and Isabella (née Fairweather, 1738). Ireland Farm is now but a pile of ruined stones at the end of a rough track about 2 miles north of Menmuir, some 5 miles north-west of Brechin. The Dons and Fairweathers were respectable farmers of Angus, the Dons having settled at Edzell in Angus after

coming south from Aberdeenshire in the 17th century. Alexander, however, was additionally or alternatively a currier, who made boots and shoes.

Alexander Don's paternal grandfather James Don had married an Isabel Fairweather, whose brother George was a paternal great-grandfather of George Don's mother. Thus, George's parents were distant cousins. George's mother Isabella was a daughter of George Fairweather (1710–1770) and Jean (née Brand, ca 1710–1749) who lived at Mains of Findowrie, near Brechin, Angus. Jean Brand was a daughter of William Brand.

In the early 1770s Alexander moved his family to Forfar, 10 miles south-west of Menmuir, where they lived in Little Causeway, a square off the West High Street. George may have combined schooling with learning his father's trade of shoe-making, but then went to Dunblane to learn the trade of making clocks and watches. There he also developed his botanical interests, and formed his first herbarium (now lost) which included mosses. Don's affinity for plants won out over his apprenticeship, and in 1779 he took a position as gardener at Dupplin Castle, about 4 miles south-west of Perth. On days off work, Don explored the Ochil and Grampian mountains. While at Dupplin he met his future bride, Caroline Clementine Sophia Oliphant Stuart (?1767–1834), who lived at nearby Gask. With names like these, she was very likely well born. Oliphants had been gentry in Perthshire and loyal to the Scottish crown for centuries (see *Dictionary of National Biography*, *DNB*). This affinity to the Scottish crown caused them difficulties at the time of the Jacobite rising in the early and middle 18th century, but they subsequently managed to re-establish themselves to some extent at Gask. The songwriter Carolina Oliphant (1766–1845) was born at Gask (see *DNB*).

George and Caroline were both too young to marry around 1780, and in any case he would have lacked the resources for raising a family. Instead, Don moved south to England for nearly 8 years, where he probably worked as a gardener at various big houses, and occasionally revisited Scotland for short periods. One such house was Hewell Grange between Bromsgrove and Redditch in Worcestershire; he also spent periods in London and Doncaster, and collected plants in Bristol and Oxford.

In 1788 Don returned to Scotland, where he resumed his first trade of watch-making as a journeyman in Glasgow. Nevertheless, he passed his spare time in searching for plants. In 1789, he married Caroline Stuart, who bore 15 children, of whom either five or six survived their father.

In 1791, Don met Robert Brown (1773–1858), a medical student at the time, whose father James had been Episcopalian priest for Menmuir when Don's family lived there, before moving to Montrose. Don and Brown botanized together in Angus for 2 weeks, and in the following year Brown read a paper before the Edinburgh Natural History Society in which he reported their discoveries.

While in Glasgow, Don also became very friendly with John Mackay (1772–1802), who was a gardener and elder brother of James Townsend Mackay (1775–1862), also a gardener and who became curator of the Botanic Garden at Trinity College in Dublin. Don and John Mackay often botanized together, and explored districts such as Glen Tilt, Ben Lawers, and Skye.

In 1797, Don leased two acres of land on the north side of Forfar. The plot was known as Dove Hillock (or Doo Hillock) after the small knoll on it. Don established a nursery on ground sloping down westwards from the knoll, and stocked it with a variety of hardy plants that exceeded most other nurseries in the kingdom. He supplied

corresponding botanists with plants that he grew, and also sold fruit and vegetables to local folk.

Following Mackay's death in 1802, Don succeeded him as head gardener at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, and left his elderly father (who was a keen and proficient gardener) in charge of the nursery at Dove Hillock. From Edinburgh Don explored surrounding districts with his friend and fellow botanist Patrick Neill (1776–1851), as well as attending medical classes at the university.

Don missed the freedom of self-employment, and in 1806, aged 43, returned to Dove Hillock where he resumed care of his nursery and market garden. However, he neglected his business in favour of searching for wild plants, so he and his family had to obtain credit in 1812 for the business to continue. Even so, their circumstances had become so dire by 1813 that they had to rely on the kindness of neighbours for sustenance. In the autumn of that year, Don returned home from the hills suffering from a heavy cold. Of necessity he continued working, his cold deteriorated, and he died aged 49 on 14 January 1814.

Don's friends raised funds to help Caroline and her family, which gave Caroline an opportunity to sell the plants and transfer the tenancy of the ground to Thomas Drummond, who was 20 at the time. Caroline went to live in Newburgh, Fife, where David Booth, a lexicographer and one of the friends who raised funds for the family, administered their financial affairs. George and Caroline's only surviving daughter and eldest child died soon after George, and before the family left Forfar. Their five surviving sons had all been taught gardening and followed that trade, although the two eldest – David and George – eventually graduated to more distinguished botanical careers (see below).



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### The social and cultural milieu of Angus in the late 18th and early 19th centuries

Apart from running his nursery and market garden and exploring for wild plants, Don also participated in Forfar's civic life; for example, in 1795 he assisted with establishing a library in the town. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, eastern Scotland greatly benefited from a surge in economic growth during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. More people living along the eastern Scottish seaboard worked in the linen industry than any other; in 1841, for instance, 2,000 of the 7,000 people living in the parish of Kirriemuir (4 miles north-west of Forfar) were weavers. In Angus, manufacture of linen woven from locally grown flax was particularly important in Don's day (only becoming superseded by jute towards the middle of the 19th century), and steam-powered machinery in mills began to undercut the market for home-woven

fabric. The new wealth generated from these activities lined the pockets and extended the intellectual horizons of the bourgeoisie. A new, leisured middle class had arrived in the neighbourhood.

Forfar therefore became 'a place for resort for freeholders for the enjoyment of society in clubs and assemblies', while Kirriemuir opened its Trades Hall in 1815 as a venue for societies to meet, including a gardeners' society and a horticultural society. And a subscription library operated in the town, along with two other public libraries.

Just outside Kirriemuir, Charles Lyell (1734–1796) bought the estate of Kinnordy (grid reference NO3655) in 1782, and his son Charles (1767–1849) inherited Kinnordy on his father's death. The English Lyells were not noticeably connected with the textile industry, but moderately affluent and leisured, with many contacts outside the district. The younger Charles, who himself became the father of the famous geologist Sir Charles Lyell (1797–1875), was keenly interested in bryophytes, and in touch with William Jackson Hooker who was planning his *British Jungermanniae* (1812–1816). It would be most surprising if Don, only about 5 miles distant from Kinnordy, did not supply Lyell with plants for his estate, and in doing so meet and exchange words with him about the local bryoflora. Might Don have prevailed upon the more affluent Lyell for use of his library and a microscope?

Don also seems to have known and botanized with Douglas Gardiner (born 1786) and William Gardiner (born 1789), respectively uncle and father of the bryologist William Gardiner (1808–1852). The Gardiners lived at Dundee, where the elder William was a weaver.

Don may also have supplied plants for the estate at Fotheringham near Inverarity (grid

reference NO4544), 4 miles south of Forfar, where the young Thomas Drummond (1793–1835) was a gardener. Drummond certainly took great interest in bryophytes, and must surely have known Don, and perhaps Lyell too. In any event, it seems too much of a coincidence that three such accomplished bryologists should all be living within a few miles of each other, and active in the field at the same time. They must surely have stimulated each others' botanical interests. In 1812, for example, Don was 48, Lyell 45, and Drummond 19. Drummond took over running Don's nursery after Don's death in 1814, which makes it even more probable that they knew each other.

#### Don's children

I do not know the names and dates of all of George and Caroline Don's children. Nine or ten of them died young; several were probably born in the decade after they married.

Of his surviving children, George (1798–1856) worked as a gardener at the nursery of Messrs Dickson at Broughton near Edinburgh, before moving south to the Chelsea Physic Garden in London. He merits an entry in the *DNB*, which is surprisingly more than his father has managed. From 1821 to 1823 George junior collected plants in Madeira, Sierra Leone, São Tomé, Brazil, and the West Indies for the Royal Horticultural Society. Among other botanical works, he published the unfinished *A General System of Gardening and Botany* (4 volumes, 1831–1838). He died unmarried in London.

David Don (1799–1841) is also in the *DNB*; like his elder brother George, he worked for Messrs Dickson at Broughton and then from about 1816 at the Chelsea Physic Garden in London. From there he moved to become keeper of Aylmer Bourke Lambert's library and herbarium. In 1821, he accompanied his father's

friend Patrick Neill to Paris, where he met Cuvier and Humboldt. The following year David Don became librarian to the Linnaean Society, and from 1836 until his death he was professor of botany at King's college, London. He published over 50 botanical articles, as well as volumes 5–7 of Robert Sweet's *British Flower Garden* (1831–1837). He married Mary Evans (1796/7–1866) in London in 1837, but they had no children.

Patrick Neill Don (1806–1876) also became a gardener, and was living in Fulham, London in 1851. He married Margaret Johnston in Battersea in 1831, and was working at Biddulph, Staffordshire in the 1830s, and at Tooting, Surrey in the 1840s. Their son, George Alexander Don in turn became a gardener.

James Edward Smith Don (1807–1861) became a gardener at Knole Park, Sevenoaks, Kent. This custom of naming offspring after other prominent botanists seems strange today, but Don was not alone in this – for example, William Gardiner (1808–1852) named his son James Edward Smith Gardiner, and Benjamin Carrington's son was christened George Hedwig Carrington.

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#### Further reading

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