

Richard de Gylpyn Benson

(1856–1904)



△ Richard de Gylpyn Benson. Ron Shoubridge; reproduced from an image kindly lent by Mr and Mrs Alan de Gylpyn Benson.

Bryological career

Following a suggestion by Sir William Gower, Benson took up the study of mosses (and afterwards botany in general) 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 checklist 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, pp. 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

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

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, and in the possession of his grandson, Alan de Gylpyn Benson.

Benson joined the Moss Exchange Club before 1899, and remained a member until his death.

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, followed by 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. He never married, became an architect, and lived in Shrewsbury. 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 had formerly been rector, and where some of the 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 Bengoe, Hertford, and Henrietta (née Jeffreys, 1807–1841). Henrietta was a great-great-grandniece of Charles ‘Hanging Judge’ Jeffreys (1645–1689), Lord Chancellor of the Exchequer. 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 edn 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. One daughter, Edmunda (*née* Bourne, 1820) also exhibited paintings of flowers at the Royal

Academy of Art. She married William Benson (1819–1903), who was an elder brother of Richard Brownlow Benson (Richard de Gylpyn's father), and an architect and independent minister of Hertford. He was also interested in botany. William and Edmunda's daughter, Margaret Jane Benson (1859–1936), a cousin of Richard de Gylpyn, became head of the botany department at the Royal Holloway College, University of London in 1893, and professor there from 1912 until 1922.

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 and subsequent generations

Richard de Gylpyn ('Hardy') Benson was born in east London on 25 June, 1856, the eldest of four boys. However, with his father retiring because of ill health in the late 1850s, Richard the son spent much of his childhood in Shropshire, and was educated in Shrewsbury at a private school run by Dr Edward Calvert.

Richard 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 (1826–1885), merchant of London. Also in the same household was Joseph R. Benson (born 1841/2, Islington, London), photographer, nephew to the Gregorys. Joseph was also living with the Gregorys in 1861, so the Bensons and Gregorys were already related by the mid-19th century. Joseph Benson (born 1780, son of the prominent Wesleyan minister Joseph Benson (1749–1821, and elder brother to John Benson who married Frances Gilpin) married a Louisa Gregory. This link between the Bensons and Gregorys was further strengthened when Richard married Edward Gregory's daughter Elizabeth Mary (1862–1948) in 1883. Louisa Gregory was Elizabeth Mary's aunt. Edward Henry Gregory's father was Richard Gregory (born 1779), a miller at Cheltenham. In earlier times the Gregorys had been at Bristol, from where they were involved in the slave trade. And tracing back through history, Lt.-Col. William Gregory was prominent in the Civil War. William's father Roger Gregory (*fl.* 1629) lived at Stockwith in south Yorkshire, to where his grandfather William Gregory (*fl.* 1500–1525)

had moved from Stoney Middleton in Derbyshire. This William Gregory was apparently descended from Sir Francis Gregory of Freseley, Asfordby (or Ashfordby) and Beckensfield, Leicestershire. Sir Francis was standard-bearer to Sir Simon de Montford, and was killed at the Battle of Evesham in 1265.

Richard and Elizabeth Benson had one child, Francis Alan Gregory Benson (1885–1971). At this time Richard had a legal practice in Fleet Street, London, but before long ill health compelled him to retire (just as his father had before him) to Church Pulverbatch, aged 30. He endured 18 years of debilitating pain as progressive arthritis crippled him, and towards the end of his life he could not walk without assistance. He died at Pulverbatch on 24 February 1904.

Like his antecedents and siblings, Richard was a religious man, and as a youth he taught Sunday classes to children. In later years at Pulverbatch, he served as a member of the parish council.

In 1915 Richard's son Francis married Jessie Carter (1892–1972), a farmer and coal merchant's daughter, and soon after the First World War they emigrated to Kenya, where Francis was a farmer. They had five children – Mary Olive ('Molly', 1916–1921), Alan de Gylpyn (1919–2009), Marjorie Lavinia Tomlinson (1917–2007), Donald Charles (1922–1978) and Michael John Carter (1925–2007). Donald became a farmer in New Zealand, and Michael went to Australia. Francis and Jessie both died in New Zealand.

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