

WILLIAM VERNON (1666/7-1715)

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

Vernon became interested in mosses and Lepidoptera while at Cambridge in the late 17th century, and became friendly with John Ray in 1694. He assisted Ray with his account of cryptogams in *Historia Plantarum* (three volumes, 1686, 1688 and 1704). Ray wrote to Edward Lhwyd in 1694, commending Vernon's efforts in collecting mosses, saying that he had "been more industrious in searching out and more successful in finding the species of that tribe than any man I know.... He hath communicated to me dried samples of many sorts which I had not discovered and shown me more".

Vernon also knew James Petiver, who described him in *Musci Petiveriani Centauria Prima* (1695) as a man "who hath been very curious in the discovery of this minute Tribe of Plants".

He was a member of a botanical club that met at the Temple Coffee House in London between 1689 and 1706, whose other members included Adam Buddle, Nehemiah Grew, Martin Lister and Hans Sloane.

Some of the plants that Vernon collected are in the Sloane herbarium in the Natural History Museum, London. He corresponded with Ray, Petiver, Sloane, Richardson, Lhwyd and others, and many of these letters remain extant.

Family background and biography

William Vernon was one of seven children born to William Vernon (died c.1685-90), Esquire, gentleman of Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire, and Anne (*née* Fitzherbert). His father's and mother's families were both landowning gentry.

Anne was a daughter of John Fitzherbert (died 1661), Esquire, of Begbroke and Kiddington, Oxfordshire, whose own father Humphrey (1551-1617) of Begbroke was in turn a son of John Fitzherbert of Uphall, Hertfordshire by his second wife Anne (*née* Wenman). Anne Wenman was a daughter of Thomas Wenman (born c.1507) of Twyford

in Buckinghamshire and Carswell, Oxfordshire. Thomas Wenman married Ursula Gifford (c.1509-1558), whose great-great grandparents were Thomas Gifford (1408-1469) and Eleanor (*née* Vaux); they were 17 times great-grandparents of Diana, Princess of Wales (1961-1997). The Giffords held land at Twyford, Buckinghamshire in the 13th and 14th centuries, Brimfield in Gloucestershire since before the Norman Conquest, and numbered among their ancestors John Gifford (1232-1299), baron and 1st Lord Gifford of Brimfield (see *Dictionary of National Biography*), as well as William the Conqueror's sister Godiva of Normandy, and Robert "The Devout" Fitzharding (c.1095/6-1171), a burgess and merchant of Berkeley and Bristol (see *DNB*).

On his father's side of the family, William Vernon's father William was in turn a son of Francis Vernon, Esquire, of Hertingfordbury and Eleanor (*née* Cockain or Cockaine, 1614), daughter of William Cockain (or Cockaine, Cockraine, Cokaine, died 1642/3), merchant of London and a governor of the East India Company. He in turn may have been related to Sir William Cockaine (died 1627) of Combe, Surrey. Francis Vernon was a son of Christopher Vernon (*fl.* 1642), Esquire, of Hertingfordbury, Controller of the Pipe, by his second wife Susannah (*née* Lawrence), daughter of Roger Lawrence, gent.

William's elder brother Christopher (1663/6-?1724) became Comptroller of the Pipe Office of the Exchequer (as his paternal grandfather had been before him), but sold the family estate of Hertingfordbury in 1690, and seems to have emigrated to Herring Creek in Maryland, America. Christopher Vernon, planter of Maryland died in 1724.

William's other siblings were John, Thomas, Eleanor (who married Francis Shrimpton, goldsmith of London), Elizabeth and Mary.

William received his early education at the public school of Hertford, whence he went up to Peterhouse College, Cambridge in April 1685. He graduated B.A. in 1689, and became a fellow of the college in 1692.

By the mid-1690s Vernon was in touch with other naturalists such as John Ray and James Petiver, and in 1697/8, having procured a four-year leave of absence from Peterhouse College, he sailed to Maryland (where his elder brother Christopher had settled) for the purpose of collecting plants, animals, fossils and shells for the Royal Society and his friends at the botanical club. In the event, Vernon returned to England in late 1698, and almost immediately planned a trip to the Canaries, but despite obtaining funding from the Royal Society, Vernon got no further than the coast of Kent.

Vernon returned to Cambridge in 1702. Hardly anything is known of his later years, and nothing of when or where he died.