

PEOPLE AND PLACES OF PERRANWELL - FREDERICK HAMILTON DAVEY

I am straying somewhat from my objective of describing the lives of Perranwell people as Frederick Hamilton Davey was born in Ponsanooth and lived there for much of his life before moving to Perranwell in 1907. His claim to fame is the compilation and subsequent publication of the definitive **Flora of Cornwall** written in Perranwell and it was whilst living here that he gained increasing recognition as an eminent botanist. His life story symbolises how a person humbly born, with only a very basic education, afflicted with a recurrent serious illness, can with an indomitable spirit and single mindedness achieve eminence in his specialist field of study.

He was born in 1868 as the 12th child of Emma Davey then aged only 31. Infant mortality was chronic at the time and many of his siblings had died very young and few reached their teenage years. His education began at the Methodist Sunday School at the age of 4 and then for 2 years at the Ponsanooth Board School, which opened in 1878. He left school at the age of 11 with this very basic education to work at the Kennal Vale gunpowder factory. His father Stephen was a keen amateur naturalist, who worked at the arsenic refinery at Bissoe. It was he who imbued his son Fred with an interest in flowers, birds and animals and encouraged him to attend evening classes on natural history given by Canon Saltron Rogers of Gwennap. These classes were sponsored by the Penryn Mutual Improvement Society, where lectures and discussions covered surprisingly varied subjects ranging from Decimal Coinage to the use of Wind and Wave power to the Ethics of Suicide.

Fred Davey following his father was deeply involved in chapel affairs. The Chapel besides being a place of worship played an important part in the lives of the villagers. It was the venue for meetings and discussions not necessarily related to religion and it had a small library. Fred at 17 was a Sunday School teacher and the secretary of the Band of Hope, a junior part of the Temperance movement.

At 17 Fred contracted rheumatic fever and periodic recurrences and associated illnesses dogged him for the rest of his life. However at the age of 20 for a time his health showed some improvement and he was appointed the accounts clerk at the Bissoe arsenic works, where his father was now works manager and with two breadwinners the Davey family were able to lead a more comfortable life.

Fred now became more widely known as a diligent and enthusiastic plant collector with a wide circle of friends in all parts of the County, who followed a similar interest. Sometime in 1898 he met another passionate plant collector Allan Octavian Hume, who was instrumental in changing the course of his life from being a local plant collector to that of a respected botanist. Hume was a man of means with boundless energy, who assisted Davey financially and served as the catalyst to launch him into his life's work, which was to publish a *Flora of Cornwall*.

He had already presented some papers on botanical subjects to the Royal Institute of Cornwall [R.I.C.] at Truro and the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society [R.C.P.S.] at Falmouth, which had attracted the attention of influential naturalists like J.D. Enys and Howard Fox. More learned papers were now forthcoming and he was appointed librarian to the R.C.P.S. In 1902 he took over the post of his father as Works Manager at the Bissoe arsenic refinery. As the acknowledged expert on the flora of Cornwall he was elected as the youngest Fellow of the Linnean Society, a prestigious national organisation of botanists. In 1907 he moved to a more spacious home at Beechwood [now called Medlar Cottage] near the centre of Perranwell village.

It was whilst living there that he finally had published his **Flora of Cornwall**, which was received with acclaim and is to this day the recognised compendium of the plants of

Cornwall. Relieved of the pressure of writing up the Flora and collating the work of all the contributors, he devoted more time to the design of his new house to be built on a plot at Silver Hill. In 1911 he moved into St Pirans, now called Windrush, the home of Mark Gripper, the editor of Perran News. Owing to the depressed state of the arsenic market he was now being called upon to spend more time at the Bissoe works, in particular arranging the transportation of this toxic substance from Falmouth to far away markets in Australia and New Zealand, where it was the main component of sheep dips.

His last major contribution to botany in Cornwall was arranging a field trip around Cornwall for the pre-eminent botanists of Europe and North America putting the County firmly on the botanical map. The group were given a farewell with a sumptuous dinner at the Royal hotel in Truro.

From 1913 to his death in 1915 he was in very poor health rarely able to leave his home. He was buried at the age of 47 at the Wesleyan chapel in Ponsanooth. His life story and a vivid description of contemporary life features in a book entitled "Stars in the grass" written by Selina Bates and Keith Spurgin.

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