

WILLIAM BAKER, FGS (1787-1853)

Introduction by A.P. Woolrich

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Bridgwater had a quartet of natural historians: Robert Anstice, FGS (1757-1845), who was a ship-owner and merchant, civil engineer and Somerset's first County Surveyor; Thomas Clark (1793-1864) who was a grocer and amateur botanist; John Bowen (1785-1854), a civil engineer, wine merchant and social reformer; and William Baker, FGS (1787-1853), a currier. They became close friends and frequent correspondents, and spent much time rambling over the levels and the Quantocks.

They were all members of the Bridgwater Literary and Scientific Institution, whose records do not appear to have survived. It began as a reading room in the Market House by 1830 and by 1840 had become the Bridgwater Literary and Scientific Institution. By 1859 the Literary and Scientific Institution had moved to George Street next to the George Hotel, where it remained until 1869. It was discontinued in that year, and a subscription was raised in the town to pay off the Institution's liabilities, and renovate and refurbish the reading room. Under the terms of the Free Libraries Act of 1850, the Mayor and Town Council had transferred to itself the Institution's library of about 1,000 volumes, a collection of fossils etc, purchased from the executors of the late Robert Anstice and other articles. There was a museum from 1861-75 and a reading room in 1875. Here it remained until 1885, when a new reading room and library was constructed in the rebuilt part of the Town Hall that had been occupied by the Judges' lodgings in the Assize days. This was superseded in 1906 by the opening of the present Carnegie Library in Binford Place.

Scientific life in Bridgwater from the middle ages, with more biographical detail, can be found on A. P. Woolrich: www.bridgwaterscientists.org.uk.

After Baker's death, in 1853, John Bowen borrowed from the family Baker's papers and used them to write a biography, *A Brief Memoir of the Character of William Baker, F.G.S.*, which was published by the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1854 and which is re-issued here. The papers included a number of autobiographical letters Baker had written towards the end of his life to his eldest daughter, Mrs Chilcott of London, various collections of letters to Robert Anstice, Hepworth Dixon (biographer of Robert Blake), as well as letters he had received from eminent natural historians such as William Buckland.

In Baker's will, dated 5 October 1849, he left his 'books, pictures, subjects in natural history and curiosities' to his wife and children, but what became of them later is not known. Later in the nineteenth century Baker's papers were acquired by the collector Spencer George Perceval (see note 10) and now form part of the Additional Manuscripts at the British Library. Other collections may be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Oxford, and Bristol Record Office. Baker's nature diaries for 1820 and 1831-2 are in the collection of the Blake Museum, Bridgwater. One for 1851-2, from which Bowen quoted, is now missing.

Baker published little. As well as the series of short papers he produced for SAHNS, he was an occasional contributor to *Zoologist*, as was his contemporary Thomas Clark.

William Baker

He was born on 3 March 1787, the son of a butcher, and received a rudimentary education. At the age of nine he became a fifer with the Bridgwater Volunteers, and at the age of twelve, in 1800, he was apprenticed to Mr Tuthill, a Bridgwater currier. Baker resigned from the Volunteers when he reached

eighteen years of age, in 1805, and the following year, on completion of his apprenticeship, he became a journeyman, working first in London, then Northampton, Nottingham, Hull, Newcastle upon Tyne, Kirkcaldy and Glasgow. He returned to Bridgwater on 27 February 1809, and in the same year established a small currier's shop in Fore Street.

Currying is the art of dressing cow-hides, calf-skins, seal-skins, etc., principally for shoes, and this is done either upon the flesh or the grain. After the tanning process, the currier applies techniques of dressing, finishing and colouring to the tanned hide to make it strong, flexible and waterproof. The leather is stretched and burnished to produce a uniform thickness and suppleness, and dyeing and other chemical finishes give the leather its desired colour. After currying, the leather is then ready to pass to the fashioning trades such as saddlery, bridlery, shoemaking and glovemaking.

In 1811 Baker married Elizabeth Criddle of Monksilver, with whom he had six children, and in 1823 he moved his business to a larger property, with a residence, in St Mary Street. Here he had space for his burgeoning natural history collection.

Baker was very active in local life, being at one time or the other engaged in almost every unpaid parochial and municipal office, from being an overseer of the poor and churchwarden at St Mary's to that of Town Councillor, Alderman and Magistrate. He was never Mayor. He was involved in fund raising for the Infirmary, and in running the Bridgwater Savings Bank. Baker was vice-chairman of the Bridgwater Literary and Scientific Institution at the time of his death.

Towards the end of his life he undertook local research for Hepworth Dixon's *Robert Blake, Admiral and General at Sea, based on Family and State Papers* (1852).

From about 1851 his health began to decline, with a persistent cough and symptoms of heart failure, and he died on 8 October 1853. He was buried in St John's Churchyard, Bridgwater, on Friday 14 October 1853 in the presence of the Mayor and Corporation together with some 80 of the prominent townsfolk. In September 2013 his newly cleaned tomb, together with the memorial obelisk of his friend John Bowen, (died 1854) were re-dedicated. At the same ceremony the memorial to the cholera victims of the parish was also re-dedicated.

Self-education

Baker had a very rudimentary formal education, and was in fact self-educated, following the discovery that a number of his contemporaries, who had been sent to charity schools, were better informed than he was. A relative made him a present of a guinea which he spent on books. He made the acquaintance of John Coles Symes (1), of Bridgwater, and later Thomas Poole (2), of Nether Stowey, both of whom lent him books. Through his friendship with Poole he became acquainted with Coleridge and other notables in the Poole circle.

Natural History

Baker was drawn to natural history as a lad, when he was sent on errands to nearby villages by his father. During his apprenticeship he occupied himself by drawing birds, flowers and animals, first from books and later from real life. Miss Tuthill, the sister of his employer, encouraged him later. In May 1804, when the Volunteers were on exercises at Taunton, he began his life-long interest in beetles and insects. He first became acquainted with the botanist Thomas Clark in 1810, and together they undertook numerous walks around the neighbourhood. They soon made the acquaintance of James Jennings of Huntspill (3) whose interest was in ornithology, and who introduced him to the classifications of Linnaeus. In about 1814 he became acquainted with the Bridgwater ship-owner and engineer, Robert Anstice, (4) with whom he kept up a correspondence until Anstice's death in 1845. Baker's surviving diaries record a number of his excursions and show he was an acute observer.

Baker became a correspondent of fellow natural historians, including Dr W. E. Leach (5) a curator at the British Museum and John Samuel Miller (6) of the Bristol Institution. Through his connection with Robert Anstice he was introduced to the geologists, Professor Buckland (7) and the Revd W. D. Conybeare (8). Through his connection with Tom Poole he was introduced to Sir Humphry Davy (9) with whom he corresponded about the anatomy of the eel. Buckland nominated him as a Fellow of the Geological Society in 1842. He became a friend of Sir John Trevelyan, 5th Baronet (10) of Nettlecombe, where he met Charles Babbage.(11)

On the formation of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1849 he was elected the Secretary of the Natural History section.

Baker's premises in Saint Mary Street gave him the space to house his collection properly. He possessed a preserved boa-constrictor, and a solan goose [northern gannet (*morus bassanus*)], a swan and a stuffed fox. Also cases with numerous insects, and geological sections, which he had drawn, of the coast between the estuary of the Parrett and Minehead. Returning sailors brought him interesting objects – an alligator's head and the egg of a humming-bird, for example. Baker was conscious of not being able to spend much time on natural history due to the constant demands of his business, but he was able to investigate the eel, making dissections of them and comparing them to other small animals. He wrote jocularly to his friend John Samuel Miller – 'I have fed much on fish since you sent me S. E. Home's paper on eels...' He went on to note that... 'I think I have made some discoveries in this way, but I keep them to myself, not from selfishness, but from want of time to communicate them to others'.

For preparing skeletons he used the beetle, the *Dermestes lardarius*. The specimen was placed in a sealed box with the beetles which consumed all the flesh, leaving the skeleton ready for mounting. He seems to have been a pioneer in this method of skeleton preparation.

He published 3 papers about local natural history in Proc. SANHS – 'Somerset Fauna', Vol 1 (1851), pp 140-148; 'Somerset Fauna, Fish', Vol 2 (1852), pp 97-110; 'Somerset Fauna, Reptiles', Vol 2 (1852), pp 116-122.

Geological work

Baker was a keen geologist and made observations as he undertook his rambles in the neighbourhood. Through his link with Robert Anstice he met Buckland and Conybeare when they came to Bridgwater to examine the head of a fossil plesiosaurus that Thomas Clark had recovered from a quarry at Street. The coprolitic breccia that Baker had noted at the mouth of the Parrett interested Buckland, who encouraged Baker to draw geological sections of the neighbourhood. He wrote an article about the local geology, published in Proc. SANHS as 'Geology of Somerset', Vol 1 (1851), pp 127-139, and another on 'Cannington Park Limestone', Vol 3, (1853), pp 125-132. In November 1842 he was elected a Member of the Geological Society.

SOURCES

William Baker's MSS

Bridgwater Public Library, NRA 9186 Bridgwater Library. Baker's lecture notes not found.

Blake Museum, Bridgwater, Nature diaries for 1820 and 1831-2.

British Library, Add MS 35058 correspondence with William Hepworth Dixon, 1851-52, about Robert Blake.

Bristol Record Office, correspondence with John Samuel Miller, 1818-29.

British Library, Add MS 35173. Correspondence of William Baker, of Bridgwater, F.G.S.; this is an important collection of Baker's papers and includes drawings of natural history specimens:

- Acland (Peregrine Palmer). Sir. Bart. Letter to W. Baker. 1833. Add. 35173 f. 108.
- Baker (William). of Bridgwater, F.G.S. Portrait of (?) 19th cent. Add. 35173 f. 1.
- Baker (William). of Bridgwater, F.G.S. Scrap-book, with correspondence 1811-1848. Add. 35173.
- Ball (R-). Correspondence with W. Baker 1832. Add. 35173 ff. 101, 103.
- Buckland (William). Professor of Geology at Oxford; Dean of Westminster. Correspondence with W. Baker 1845, 1847. Add. 35173 ff. 286, 304.
- Davy (Humphry). Sir. Letters to T. Poole 1828-1829. Copies. Add. 35173 ff. 37, 37 b.
- Ellison (Maria Jane). Correspondence with W. Baker 1844. Add. 35173 ff. 267, 275, 277.
- Monet de Lamarck (Jean Baptiste Pierre Antoine). Naturalist. References to his collection of shells 19th cent. Add. 35173 ff. 310, 314, 348.
- Natural History. Scrap-book of W. Baker 1811-1848. Add. 35173.
- Owen (Richard). Sir. K.C.B.; Naturalist. Letter to Dr. Buckland 1844. Copy. Add. 35173 f. 281.
- Prideaux (Caroline). Correspondence with W. Baker 1841-1846. Add. 35173 ff. 221, 270, 282, 292, 293.
- Rathbone (Benson). Correspondence with W. Baker 1833, 1834. Add. 35173 ff. 125, 143.
- Standart (W- C-). Letter to W. Baker 1845. Add. 35173 f. 272.
- Yarrell (William). Ornithologist. Letter to W. Baker 1838. Copy. Add. 35173 f. 157.
- Zoology. Scrap-book of W. Baker 1811-1848. Add. 35173.

Fitzwilliam Museum, Oxford, GBR/0280/PERCEVAL Perceval Bequest, Letters from Baker to Buckland.

Somerset Record Office, Bowen MSS, DD/CLE Box 5:18 is a file about William Baker.

William Baker's published writings

He published no books but did write some papers for the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society:

'Bridgwater High Cross' Vol 1 (1851) p 63

'Bridgwater Old Bridge' Vol 1 (1851) p 64

These articles are illustrated by engravings by T.H. Hair, perhaps copied from Chubb originals.

'Geology of Somerset', Vol 1 (1851), pp 127-139

'Somerset Fauna', Vol 1 (1851), pp 140-148

'Somerset Fauna, Fish', Vol 2 (1852), pp 97-110

'Somerset Fauna, Reptiles', Vol 2 (1852), pp 116-122

'Cannington Park Limestone', Vol 3 (1853), pp 125-132

For *Zoologist* he wrote:

'On the capture, habits and change of plumage of the black stork (*Ciconia nigra*)', vol 8 (1850) pp 2700-2703. This is a series of extracts of the correspondence between Robert Anstice and Col. Montague, 1814-1815, and published in full in S. P. Dance, *Letters on ornithology 1804-1815 between George Montagu and Robert Anstice* (2003).

REFERENCES

1) John Coles Symes (1785-1872) was the son of John Symes, a Bridgwater surgeon and went on to become a solicitor in London. His mother was the daughter of Rev. John Coles, Vicar of Bridgwater. He maintained a correspondence with Baker until the latter's death.

2) Thomas Poole (1765-1837) was a tanner, politician and philanthropist and lived at Nether Stowey. He became acquainted with the Romantic poets – Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey, as well as Humphry Davy and members of the Wedgwood family.

3) James Jennings (c1770-c1840) was the son of a village shopkeeper, John Jennings, and of his wife Elizabeth Fear. He was born in Huntspill, Somerset, where he was educated locally at North Petherton school. He worked for a while in Bristol as an apothecary and returned to Huntspill in 1801 to work in his family's grocery shop until the mid - 1810s when economic depression led to the failure of the business. During this period he was by no means idle, continuing his literary pursuits. He contributed to the *Monthly Magazine* from 1807, and occasionally to the provincial newspapers. In 1810 he published a volume of poems consisting of *The Mysteries of Mendip, the Magic Ball, Sonnets*, and in 1814, *The Prospects of Africa, and other Poems*.

In 1817, he returned to London where he worked as a professional writer, with some support from a wealthy baker, Sir William Paxton. His works included the *Family Cyclopaedia* (1821), *Observations on Some of the Dialects of the West of England* (1825) and *Ornithologia* (also known as *The Birds*) which is a poem in two parts (1828). He also founded the short-lived Metropolitan Literary Institution in 1823 and was editor of the *Metropolitan Literary Journal* (1824).

4) Robert Anstice (1757-1845) was a ship-owner and merchant, civil engineer and Somerset's first County Surveyor. He was baptised 9 December 1757, and died 30 April 1845 aged 88. Robert Anstice followed his father as a ship-owner and merchant, and later took over his brother-in law's share of the Coalport China Works. He lived at first in a house near the Town Bridge, facing the river, and latterly moved to Dampiet House. He was Comptroller of Customs by 1794, Town Councillor from 1799-1834, and Mayor in 1804, 1817 and 1825. He was Alderman from 1827. He was a member of the Commission for Sewers, the body responsible for drainage matters on the Levels.

He was an active anti-slavery reformer and was a Freemason. He was a keen amateur geologist and ornithologist, and wrote two books on mathematics. He was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society in 1818. His correspondence on ornithology with Col. George Montagu was published in 2003. On his death his collection was sold by Sotheby's in 1846, but, according to Jarman his fossils were sold to the Bridgwater Literary and Scientific Institution. Some of his antiquarian collection was acquired by the British Museum.

5) William Elford Leach FRS (1790-1836) was an English zoologist and marine biologist. In 1813 Leach was appointed as assistant librarian in the Zoological Department at the British Museum, and later was made assistant keeper of the Natural History Department and became an expert on crustaceans and molluscs. He also worked on insects, mammals and birds. In 1821 he suffered a nervous breakdown due to overwork and resigned from the museum in March 1822. He died of cholera in the Palazzo San Sebastiano, near Tortona, north of Genoa.

6) John Samuel Miller, FLS (1779-1830) was an English naturalist. Miller, born Johann Müller, who came to England as a refugee from Napoleon, lived in Bristol. He was appointed curator of the Bristol

Institution for the Advancement of Science and Art on its foundation in 1823.

7) The Very Rev. Dr William Buckland DD FRS (178-1856) was an English theologian who became Dean of Westminster, and a geologist and palaeontologist, who wrote the first full account of a fossil dinosaur, which he named *Megalosaurus*.

8) William Daniel Conybeare FRS (178-1857), Dean of Llandaff, was an English geologist, palaeontologist and clergyman. He was an authority on marine reptile fossils in the 1820s, including important papers for the Geological Society of London on ichthyosaur anatomy and the first published scientific description of a plesiosaur.

9) Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829), English chemist and inventor. He became an acquaintance of Poole's in 1798, and occasionally visited Nether Stowey where he met Baker.

10) Sir John Trevelyan, 5th Baronet of Nettlecombe, (1761-1846). He was a country landowner with another estate in Northumberland. His father, Sir John, 4th Baronet, had been an MP. His son, Sir Walter Calverley Trevelyan, 6th Baronet (1797–1879), was a naturalist. Beatrice Trevelyan, (1809 - 1898) sister of the 6th Baronet married her cousin Capt. Ernest Augustus Perceval, of Henbury (Glos) and Northumberland. Their son, Spencer George Perceval, (1838-1922), was an English amateur antiquary, geologist, and purchased William Baker's papers towards the end of the nineteenth century.

11) Charles Babbage, FRS (1791–1871) was a mathematician, philosopher, inventor and mechanical engineer, who is best remembered now for originating the concept of a programmable computer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

J.G. Alford. *Family Notes, Symes, etc* (c1920). Privately produced TS in the collection of the Blake Museum, Bridgwater. The author appears to have been Josiah George Alford CBE (1847-1924), Canon of Bristol Cathedral and author of *Alford family notes, ancient and modern* (1908).

John Bowen, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Character of William Baker, F. G. S.*, Taunton, 1854. A modern version of this is available by demand reprint based on the Google microfilm project. This is not worth pursuing since several pairs of pages in the original were never filmed.

Elizabeth Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends* (1888).

A.P. Woolrich, *Bridgwater Scientists*: www.bridgwaterscientists.org.uk.