

## JOHN BLACKSTONE, APOTHECARY AND BOTANIST (1712-53)

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The discovery of John Blackstone's herbarium at Ripon Museum has caused a renewed interest in that diligent but little known early botanist, and study of botanical literature reveals that apart from Trimen & Dyer's account of his life (1869, *Flora of Middlesex*, 389-91) all other biographies are based on the details given by Richard Pulteney in his *Historical and Biographical Sketches of the Progress of Botany*, . . . 2, 270-74, with added extracts from the *Literary and Scientific Correspondence of Richard Richardson, M.D., F.R.S.*, . . . ed. by Dawson Turner, (1835), 351-55. Examination of Blackstone's herbarium and various genealogical sources have however revealed a number of new facts and in this paper these are brought together for the first time. A numbered list of the references used is appended at the end of the paper, and the occurrence of these numbers in the text indicates the authority for the particular fact cited.

John Blackstone was born in London in 1712, the first child of Edward Blackstone, Ironmonger and Citizen of London, and his wife Sarah, the daughter of Francis Ashby of Breakspeares, Harefield, Middlesex (12, 14 and 19). His father was apparently in comfortable circumstances and John probably received a good early education. About 1729 he was possibly apprenticed to an apothecary in the Strand (18), though the Apprenticeship Books of the Inland Revenue fail to confirm the transaction.

Shortly before Christmas, 1730, Edward Blackstone died, suddenly, leaving his widow with three sons, John, Edward (c. 1715-56) and Francis (1722-1809) (20). Edward was buried at Harefield on December 28th (10) and his widow and two youngest sons took up residence at that place, staying with Francis Ashby at Breakspeares. John continued to live in the Strand, but spent his holidays with his family at Harefield. He soon became interested in the study of botany and by 1734 had begun his explorations in the Harefield district (18). It was in this year that he discovered *Dentaria bulbifera* L. growing abundantly in the Old Park, and in the following year he recorded *Orchis abortiva fusca* [*Neottia nidus-avis* (L.) Rich.], in Whiteheath Wood on Harefield Common, but very rarely, and *Geranium Robertianum, flore albo*, in a hedge by the roadside near Ruislip [Ruislip] Town (3).

In 1736 he began a correspondence with Sir Hans Sloane, Dr J. J. Dillenius, Isaac Rand and many other eminent botanists of the day (18). His paternal grandfather, John Blackstone (c. 1650-1716) had been a prominent member of the Apothecaries Company of London (Warden, 1712-13) (1), Apothecary (1695-1712), liberal benefactor to St Bartholomew's Hospital (11), and a friend and associate of Sir Hans (20). It was

possibly for this reason that the baronet encouraged the younger Blackstone in his studies. During the summer Blackstone had a long illness and spent his convalescence tramping the countryside around Harefield and Uxbridge in search of new plants. December however found him again in the Strand, and on the 11th of the month he addressed a letter to Dr Richard Richardson of North Bierley, Yorks., advising him of the discovery of *Dentaria*:—"By good fortune I have discovered the *Dentaria baccifera* J.B. to be a native of this Island—The place where it grows is in a large wood near a village call'd Harefield, about eighteen miles north-west from London, where it grows in such plenty, that some acres of ground are cover'd with it." Then follows the first reference to the proposed "Fasciculus":—"There are several other rare plants to be found thereabouts, of which a catalogue is now ready for the press; and I hope for your encouragement, the value when printed being a trifle." That Blackstone received a favourable reply is certain, for a further letter to Richardson, dated 18th December, gives a full and complete account of the intended work and the events which led to its preparation; he writes: "I have for these last three years been employ'd in making a collection of the native English plants; and having an opportunity of going to see my friends pretty often, I made it my business to see as many of the adjacent places as my time would permit, and to collect such plants as offer'd themselves in the course of my walks, without ever intending to publish anything on this subject. But, being detained last Summer by a long illness, near four months on the spot, I found so many rare plants that I thought it worthwhile to make a catalogue of them, and show it to some skilful persons in that science for their approbation, which succeeded to my desire; and I only beg leave to let you know, that the plants there mentioned were gathered almost solely by myself, as also that the catalogue is not general; being only intended as an essay for a more particular search thereabouts. Your opinion in relation to the middle counties of England being not well search'd is most certainly right; and I am pretty well assur'd that Buckinghamshire would itself afford ample speculation for the curious botanist, from such few places I have been on that account. I purpose to print my work by subscription, tho' the price of it cannot exceed five shillings; and I desire no money till the book is deliver'd."

Blackstone spent Christmas, 1736, with his family at Breakspeares, and in the early Spring of 1737 was again there, apparently recovering from another illness, as in a letter to Sir Hans Sloane, dated April 8th, he says ". . . The air proves serviceable to me in general tho' there are still some symptoms remaining which a perfect state of health ought to be without, particularly the swelling of my legs after walking, and the heat of my hands and feet towards night. I have been on horse back once, but suffer'd so much by it that I have not ventur'd since." The summer of this year saw the publication of his *Fasciculus Plantarum circa Harefield sponte nascentium*. This was a small catalogue arranged in alphabetical order with synonymys taken from the works of Bauhin, Gerard, Parkinson, together with others in common use at the time.

The plant name was followed by the general place of growth, the precise locality in the case of local or rare plants, and the period of flowering. The plants were mainly Phanerogams, but a few Cryptogams were included. The total number of plants given was 527, and the work contained an appendix giving a concise description of Harefield, of which the following is an extract:—"The soil within this compass is various; that of the South and East parts being a strong clay, very productive of Elm and Oak, which thrive very well here. The North and West parts, bordering on Hertfordshire and Bucks., is generally a dry chalk and stony land. The Parish is in circumference about sixteen miles, and is, in great measure surrounded with woods, almost of all sorts, and is perfectly well water'd; for besides the River Colne, which runs a small distance from the village, springs are scarcely anywhere more frequent. This place is particularly remarkable on the account of an extraordinary fine spring call'd Gulch Well, that arises at the foot of a chalk hill, and produces at its first appearance, with a very strong current, a body of water, two feet deep and four feet broad. Several attempts have been formerly made, towards bringing the delicate water of this spring to supply the Cities of London and Westminster: But, as nothing of that kind has hitherto been effected, its water only serves to furnish the River Colne, already almost overcharg'd with Springs." The volume was dedicated to Sir Hans Sloane.

Blackstone had apparently completed his apprenticeship and the summer months found him staying at Charlbury in Oxfordshire where resided his uncle, John Blackstone, Keeper of Wychwood Forest (9). During his stay Blackstone compiled a MS. Catalogue of plants to be found in the area (4). August found him staying at the house of Alexander Benet, at Marden Ash, near Chipping Ongar, Essex. Another uncle, William Blackstone (d. 1727), also an apothecary, owned property near here, and it was possibly through him or his widow Ann that John made Benet's acquaintance (13, 14). It was from Marden Ash that he addressed a letter to Sloane on the 18th: "It is my duty to acquaint you with such acquisitions as I have made in relation to my beloved study which are as follows, *Nymphaea alba*, in the river at Abridge, *lutea*, in the moat at Ongar Castle, and in the river at Chelmsford, *Saponaria* [*Saponaria officinalis* L.] in a hedge near Weale Hall, *Calamintha vulgaris* [*Satureia ascendens* (Jord.) Druce or *S. Nepeta* (L.) Scheele], by the roadside between Ingatestone and Chelmsford most abundantly, *Inula Campana* [*Inula Helenium* L.] in the Orchard at Smith's Hall plentifully, *Adiantum album* [*Asplenium Ruta-muraria* L.], on Wisford Bridge, *Menthastrum spicatum folio longiore candicante* [*Mentha longifolia* (L.) Huds.], by the roadside near Chipping Ongar." He goes on to say that he is perfectly well and hopes to visit Braintree and Colchester. His improved health was short-lived, however, for in another letter written to Sloane eight days later we read: "I am sorry to let you know that on Sunday last my old complaint of my side returned very smartly and still continues to a great degree . . . I can not come to town till the symptoms are somewhat abated. I have met

with nothing new in Botany, being not able to walk far . . . you will please excuse all faults being in much pain . . .”

The autumn found Blackstone's health again improved and he visited Charlbury (6), but in late September he was again at Harefield devoting himself even more ardently to the study of his favourite subject. In a letter to Sloane, written on the 29th, he says “ I yesterday rec'd a most obliging letter from Dr Richardson, who has been so good as to give a very good character to my small performance . . . and advises me to pursue my searches into Natural History, and I must own the study grows more and more agreeable to me to search after anything new, however I have found the *Blattaria Plinii* [*Verbascum Blattaria* L.] in another place not mentioned in my *Fasciculus*.” That he had acquired a taste for Mycology is obvious, for the letter continues: “ There are many sorts of Fungi which grow plentifully hereabouts, and if you would be so kind as to lend me Steerbeck's *Theatrum Fungorum*, it would come very safe by Uxbridge Coach, which inns at the Black Bull in Holborn, and will till after Saturday set out at two o'clock in the afternoon. I would take particular care of it, and return it in a fortnight, by which time I must come to town, being obliged to go into Oxfordshire soon afterwards. I hope, Sir, that from the singular respect you have already shew'd me you will excuse my request, but I cannot help pursuing my Botanic study, and I hope it may in time prove advantageous to me.” It would appear that the eminent Sir Hans suggested to Blackstone that the time had come for him to go into business on his own account, as in a letter addressed from Breakspears on 26th October Blackstone writes “ I wish it was in my power to give you a good account of my affairs in regard to fixing in business, but nothing of that kind is propos'd till Xmas is over, so that I purpose on Friday to go into Oxfordshire. I hope, Sir, this absence will be no prejudice to your esteem for me, but to engage in business without any foundation would not be deem'd a prudent action, therefore as I am obliged to be depending, I must wait till those I depend on, are pleas'd to make a beginning for me. If you write soon be pleas'd to direct for me at Mr Gibsons at Pembroke College, where I shall be about ten days, afterwards I am obliged to go to a relation of my own name at Charlbury, who has a great value for me.”

December found Blackstone still at Charlbury and in a letter written on the 6th and addressed to Sloane he says “ I had wrote you before, but was willing to give you the best account I could of my success in the prosecution of Botany, and not withstanding the season is so far advanced I have found the following plants to add to the Catalogue which I made during my stay here in the Summer, viz., *Stachys Fuchsii* [*Stachys germanica* L.], in the Forest Lane near Charlbury plentifully, *Alsine foliis tenuissimis* [*Arenaria tenuifolia* L.] and *Plantago minor monanthos Parisiensis* [*Littorella lacustris* L.], in the bogs near Cornbury, and in other parts of the forest. *Campanula pratensis flore conglomerato* [*Campanula glomerata* L.], in barren places not uncommon. Mosses are to be met with here in plenty, but 'tis my misfortune not to

be acquainted with their difference, but I intend to collect a parcel before I go from hence, tho' I purpose to be at Oxford on Friday next." He then reveals that his mother is ill, giving a morbid account of her disorders, but concludes on a more cheerful note: "I hope, Sir, that tho' absent, I still have part of your favour, for had my relations been willing to have fix'd me in business, I would not have left London, but as soon as Xmas is over, I am determin'd to get into business some way, for I believe my health is established."

In 1738 Blackstone was admitted into the Society of Apothecaries of London, and by September was established as an apothecary in Fleet Street, "at the Griffin near Salisbury Court, in the Parish of St Brides" (1), and being kept busy in his new profession apparently had little or no time for botany. About 1739 he married a widow named Webb (19, 20), and despite marital and business affairs found time to make at least one excursion into Kent, collecting a number of maritime plants including *Trifolium maritimum* Huds. at Sheerness (21).

The meetings held by the Society of Apothecaries brought Blackstone into close touch with many of his fellow members. These included Joseph Miller of Bishopsgate, who was elected a Warden of the Company in 1737 and Master in 1739; Isaac Rand of St James's, Hay Market; Robert Nicholls of Tothill Street, Westminster, who was elected a Warden in 1739 and Master in 1741; John Field of Newgate Street, John Wilmer of Bishopsgate Street, and William Watson of Aldersgate Street (1). Miller, Rand and Nicholls were all keen botanists and considerably older than Blackstone and no doubt encouraged the young apothecary in his studies, but Watson was three years his junior, and appears to have been his closest friend and companion. Both Miller and Rand were closely associated with the Apothecaries Garden at Chelsea, and it was probably from them that Blackstone obtained many of the exotic plants which are preserved in his herbarium.

About 1740 Blackstone suffered a blow by the death of his wife; this was further aggravated by a slump in trade, possibly due to keen competition from rivals as many other apothecaries traded in the district. By September his financial difficulties had become so great that he was obliged to appeal to Sloane for help. In his letter he says "Trade is very dull and money very hard to get at, so that if you think my work deserves any encouragement should be grateful to you for it now, and shall ever be proud of doing further service when you command." Whether the baronet complied with this rather direct request is not known.

In 1741 he accepted John Vernon of Malpas, Cheshire, as his apprentice (15), and his business appears to have been in a more flourishing state. During 1742, Blackstone married Mary, the only daughter of Richard Abbott, Painter-Stainer and Citizen of London (19). The marriage took place at St Saviours, Newgate Street, London (19). During 1743 Blackstone suffered further losses by the death of his grandfather, Francis Ashby, in May (20), and his mother in June (12). Both Ashby

and Sarah Blackstone were buried at Harefield (10), and in her will Sarah bequeathed to John the sum of £30 (12).

Early in 1744 Blackstone was corresponding with Mr Halfhide, "an eminent apothecary and curious botanist of Cambridge" (21), Thomas Knowlton, gardener to the Earl of Burlington at Londesborough, Yorks. (21), and Mr Thornbeck, a surgeon of Ingleton, Yorks. (16). He had also become acquainted with Ambrose Dawson (16), Physician to St George's Hospital, London, and a keen amateur botanist. Dawson was a Yorkshireman by birth and it was probably with him that Blackstone visited the north of England, collecting *Dianthus plumarius* L. on Fountains Abbey walls, *Polygonatum officinale* (L.) All. near Settle, and *Sedum villosum* L., *Antennaria dioica* L. and *Pyrola rotundifolia* L. at Ingleboro' (21). During the summer his wife presented him with a daughter, Maria, who died in infancy (19). His father-in-law, Richard Abbott, died in July 1745 (2), bequeathing to his daughter Mary the sum of £500 (12).

The *Specimen Botanicum quo Plantarum plurium rariorum Angliae indigenarum loci natales illustrantur* was published in 1746. This small work of Blackstone's was regarded by Pulteney as "a valuable addition to the third edition of Ray's *Synopsis*," and was the last book to be published in England on the indigenous botany, before the system of Linnaeus gained the ascendancy over that of Ray. The volume was arranged in the same manner as the *Fasciculus*, but contained the localities of 366 species of the more rare and local British plants. A number of Harefield plants given in the *Fasciculus* were repeated, but there were numerous records from all parts of Britain. Apart from Blackstone, records were contributed by Watson, Dawson, Wilmer, Thornbeck, Nicholls, Miller, John Hill, Samuel Hurlock (hanged for armed robbery at Tyburn in 1747 (20)) and many others.

Blackstone had by this time acquired some property at Harefield (10) and in 1747 was again botanizing in his favourite locality, collecting among other plants *Juncellus omnium minimus capitulis Equiseti* [*Eleocharis acicularis* Sm.] on Uxbridge Moor (7). During the summer months of 1748 he made excursions into Northampton and Buckinghamshire (21), and in October contributed a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* dealing with a cure for cattle distemper by means of Jesuit's Bark. He mentions cures which had been effected at Enfield and Southgate. In September of this year his wife presented him with a second daughter, Sophia (19).

About 1752 Blackstone's health again began to fail and he died at Harefield on 11th March 1753 (19). He was buried in the churchyard near to his father and mother on the 18th (10). In his will he bequeathed to John Abbott, his wife's brother, "my largest punch bowl and silver ladle together with my seal engraved with a man at work," to his brother Francis "my Cornolian Seal with 2 heads engraved in silver, the silver can engraved with my grandfather's coat of arms and my mortuary penknife." The rest of his estate he left to his wife. His personal books were apparently sold, some of them coming into the possession of Dr

Thomas Birch, Secretary of the Royal Society, 1752-65, and eventually finding their way into the British Museum when Birch's library was presented. Among the books in the museum is a copy of Ray's *Synopsis* in which Blackstone has marked the plants contained in his herbarium. It bears the inscription "Plantae quib. in hoc libro haec nota (x) praefixa est, in horto sicco nostro asservatur. J. Blackstone, 1736, 1/12."

His name was perpetuated by Hudson in the genus *Blackstonia*, and a number of his plants are preserved in the Sloane Herbarium, but a specimen of *Dentaria* is the only plant localized. This small collection, numbering less than 50 plants, was for many years recognized as Herb. Blackstone. This, however, was disproved in 1947 by the discovery of three large volumes of Blackstone's plants at Ripon Museum, Yorks. The circumstances leading up to the discovery of the collection are of interest and I am indebted to Messrs A. H. G. Alston and A. J. Wilmott of the British Museum (Natural History) for the following details. A number of the sheets on which the plants are mounted are endorsed "H.L.", this had been misinterpreted at Ripon as "Herb. Linnaeus", but Mr Alston writes that it probably refers to Herb. Lister (i.e. Martin Lister, 1638-1712). Specimen sheets were sent to the Linnean Society for their scrutiny, and Blackstone's handwriting and initials were identified by Messrs S. Savage, of the Linnean Society, and Alston. The collection which is in fairly good condition has now been transferred to the British Museum (Natural History). It contains many British and exotic plants mostly named in pre-Linnean nomenclature, though unfortunately only about 50 sheets are localized. The collection also contains a set of Sir John Hill's (1716-75) cryptogams. Most of the sheets are labelled in Blackstone's hand-writing, but some have been added by others, and a few are dated as late as 1800.

Mary Blackstone died in December 1801, aged 78, and was buried near John in Harefield Churchyard (10). Sophia married Hector, son of the Rev. David Davis, in 1780. She died in December 1827, and was buried at St Mary's, Islington (19). Among John's better known relatives may be mentioned his cousin, Sir William Blackstone (1723-80), Judge of the King's Bench.

I am indebted to Messrs A. H. G. Alston and J. E. Lousley for much helpful advice while compiling this paper.

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