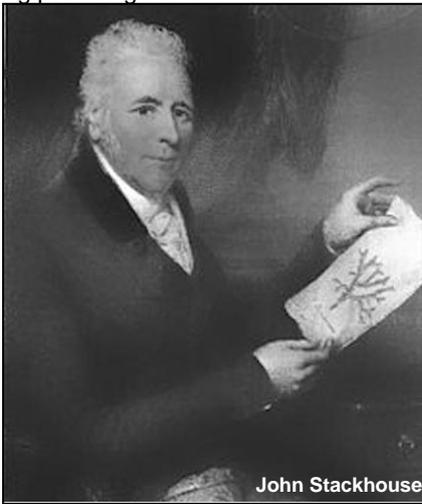


HEREFORDSHIRE FUNGUS RECORDS FROM THE PAST.

Ted Blackwell. [Former Herefordshire Recorder, 1993 to 2008.]

Only relatively recently have mushrooms and toadstools and their direct relatives (such as brackets, truffles, moulds, rusts and the like) been recognised as distinct from plants, forming an entirely separate biological kingdom, *The Fungi*. Until about 1990 the internationally agreed rules for naming and describing living organisms lumped fungi in with plants, albeit as 'lower plants'. Historically, the early plant hunters and botanists observed and recorded fungi along with their plants, so it is to those we must look when seeking past fungus records.



John Stackhouse

The earliest known records of fungi in Herefordshire occur in an account written about 1790 by a noted botanist of those times, John Stackhouse (1742-1819). We know from the 1868 *Transactions* of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club that he made the first systematic classification of Agaric fungi in English (instead of in the usual Latin), in which he included his observations of a number of species he had seen in Herefordshire. He was Lord of the Manor of Capler and a local land-owner. According to the Woolhope account:

"Capler Hill and wood seem to have been his favourite haunt, and here no doubt the prying old gentleman in the costume of his day – cocked hat, knee breeches and great silver buckles in his shoes – and perhaps with gold-headed cane in hand, might have been seen prying among the dead matted leaves under the trees of the wood, his eyes sparkling with pleasure as the elegant *Nidularia campanulata*¹, or a specimen of the great "Club of Hercules"² both of which he gathered here, met his delighted view."



Nidularia campanulata, now known as *Cyathus olla*

The Stackhouse compilation was included in a book published by William Withering in 1792, *A Botanical Arrangement of British Plants*,³ which became the standard British work on

botany for many years to come. Undoubtedly, Withering's book was used by botanists who decades later were among the leading figures in the inauguration of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club of Hereford in 1851. The Stackhouse records at Capler Hill would, therefore, be background local history and when in 1868 the Club arranged its first meeting specifically to look for fungi, Capler Hill wood was one of the venues for that historical day. The meeting had been advertised as "A Foray among the *Funguses*", and is now seen as the archetype of all subsequent fungus forays.

Thereby began a long and productive period of fungus recording in Herefordshire, essentially guided and driven by the ebullient enthusiasm for fungi of one man who today may be thought of as the Father of the Fungus Foray, Dr Henry



Dr Henry Graves Bull

Graves Bull. Each October thereafter for the rest of his life Bull organised and led a foraying week that became famed as the Hereford Forays, attracting distinguished mycologists from around Britain and the Continent, and records of these forays may be found year-by-year in the Woolhope Club *Transactions*. A catalogue of the *Fungi of Herefordshire*, started by Bull, was completed after his death by Dr M.C.

Cooke (an honorary member of the Club and Cryptogamic Botanist at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew), and published in Curtis & Ley's *Flora of Herefordshire* in 1889.



Clavariadelphus pistillaris
(photo John Bingham)

Bull died in 1885 and, although with Dr. Cooke's active support the Hereford Forays continued, still attended by many out-of-county mycologists of Bull's time, some subtle environmental change occurred causing a waning in the abundance of fruitbodies. Cooke wrote of the 1892 foray that "there is a great dearth of larger fungi, those of the mushroom kind, everywhere. To whatever causes we may attribute this, the fact still remains, the woods which in the days of our remembrance literally swarmed with toadstools, are now comparatively bare." Beset by seasons of fungus famine and forays abandoned due to bad weather and, despite Cooke's attempts to rally support, the Hereford Forays - and what had been uninterrupted extensive recording of Herefordshire fungi since 1868 - came to an end in 1892.

However, the fame and achievement of the Hereford Forays had spread, and other naturalist societies and field clubs had begun to hold their own. The Yorkshire Naturalists' Union (YNU) aspired to continue the Hereford tradition and, at its Huddersfield Foray in 1895 Cooke, together with several other distinguished veterans of the Hereford Forays, mooted the formation of a national mycological society. At the YNU Selby foray in the following year a proposal to form a new society was successful. Later, in his Presidential Address in 1907, the newly elected Charles Crossland recalled: "The gathering of mycologists and cryptogamists in general was larger than on any previous occasion and it was gratifying to notice the welcome presence of several Woolhopeans who acknowledged that the Yorkshire gathering is a worthy successor to the once famous meeting of mycologists at Hereford under the auspices of the Woolhope Club".

Thereby, the British Mycological Society (BMS) came into being “for the study of Mycology in all its branches, systematic, morphological and pathological, the publication of annual reports recording all recent discoveries in any branch of mycology, more especially giving a brief synopsis of **recent additions to the British Fungus Flora.**”

The BMS began to arrange annual forays nationally and, at the invitation of the Woolhope Club, organised its sixth annual week’s foray at Hereford in September 1902, reporting the event in its *Transactions* with lists of many species gathered.

After the Woolhope Club’s pioneering lead in recording fungi for much of the Victorian era, the 1902 joint Foray may be seen as almost the last gasp of Woolhopean mycological participation. Thereafter, until the 1950s, recording in Herefordshire enters a dark age. The only systematic recording seems to have been confined to BMS Forays, the next held in 1914 at Symonds Yat, another in 1926 at Hereford and again at Hereford in 1951 - the latter, somewhat ironically, arranged to celebrate the Woolhope Club’s Centenary, long after it had relinquished its mycological lead, or indeed, much of its interest. With a similar penchant for tradition, a return to Herefordshire was again made for the 1996 BMS Spring Foray, when the BMS celebrated its own Centenary with an evocation of Woolhopean times by a Grand Dinner in Hereford’s Green Dragon Hotel.

In the gaps between organised forays there is nevertheless the reassuring confirmation of prominent mycologists visiting Herefordshire, if only fleetingly. Scattered across the years one may find random records from sporadic casual visiting by specialists and others. Early on, old-stagers from Woolhopean days such as Dr. Cooke, William Philips, and Carleton Rea, then later, the appearance of other specialists of those times, such as Elsie Wakefield (RGB, Kew), A.A. Pearson (Agarics), J.T. Palmer (Gasteromycetes), Peter Orton (Agarics), Francis Rose (Lichens), Douglas Graddon (Discomycetes, living at Ross and BMS President in 1956). But in the 60 year period between 1900 and 1960, the number of records (including those from the four BMS forays and the locally resident Douglas Graddon) barely exceed 3000.

Some lightening of the gloom begins to emerge in the 1950s. The Hereford Botanical Society had been formed in 1951 and for a few years their President John Price led annual forays. Although forays are mentioned both in the Botanical Society’s Minutes and in contemporaneous botanical reports in the Woolhope Club’s *Transactions*, no records of fungi found on forays exist in the archives of either organisation. In successive Woolhope reports for 1958 and 1960 the low regard for fungal recording, with a disinterest almost hinting at disdain, is evidenced by what seems today as an amazing comment “The list of fungi has not been published as there are no new records for the county.” [my underlining] However, “should any member be interested” a list was available on application to a Mr. Kendrick. More tantalisingly, two years later in 1963, a foray was reportedly held in the Capler area “and although the number of species found (some sixty) was not large there were many rare

species amongst them”. However, in stark contrast and some compensation for the sorry lack of foray records, a nugget of gold appears in a concluding tailpiece, listing six species recorded by a visiting mycological specialist, James T. Palmer. These finds were from Moccas Park, and four have been discovered to be new records for Herefordshire⁴, a discovery 54 years after the event.

From about 1950, an active local naturalist from Worcestershire, Fred Fincher, was taking a special interest in fungi and, more in accord with today’s scientific recording, records from his Herefordshire excursions to Downton Gorge, Eastnor, Moccas Park and many other sites begin to illuminate the hitherto prevailing darkness. He appears as a successor to John Price in leading forays as revealed in a botanical report in the 1964 *Transactions*:

“The fungus foray, under the leadership of Mr F. Fincher was held in Mains wood, Putley. It produced 71 species which was very good considering the dry season. In one part of the wood large numbers of *Boletus parasiticus*⁵ were found, whilst a remarkable amount of *Chlorociboria aeruginascens*⁶ was found scattered throughout the wood.”

But banishment of the dark age finally occurred when in 1961 Stephanie Thomson joined the Botanical Society and began systematically to record fungi. Not only were these her personal observations but also records listed on local forays by various organisations, which she carefully preserved in a series of note-books. When in 1992 the BMS moved to establish throughout the UK local recording groups running their own computerised databases, Stephanie Thomson’s 5000 or so records formed a substantial foundation on which the Herefordshire Fungus Survey Group’s fungus database was launched. The database became operational in 1993 and in subsequent years has grown apace, swelled by the steady flow of foray records generated by HFSG, which held its first foray at Humber Marsh on 26 August 1998. From this database source, our Recorder routinely sends new records to the national fungus database FRDBI, managed by the BMS. Our present Recorder, Jo Weightman, took over the recording role from Ted Blackwell in 2009. She



HFSG members foraying on the Croft Castle Estate, Oct. 5th 2016

reports that in February 2018 the total of Herefordshire databased records stood at 82314 representing about 3900 species.

¹Field Birds Nest, *Cyathus olla*.

²Pipe Club, *Clavariadelphus pistillaris*.

³A more comprehensive list of fungi mentioned therein by Stackhouse is given in *Some Account of the History of Botanical Exploration in Herefordshire*, by P.W. Carter. *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Club* Vol 1952-3-4. pp. 242-261.

⁴*Lanzia echinophila*; Oakleaf Cup *Rutstroemia sydowniana*; Earthtongue *Geoglossum fallax*; Earthtongue *Glutinoglossum glutinosum*.

⁵Parasitic Bolete *Pseudoboletus parasiticus* [Note: Now thought to be non-parasitic on Earth Ball species *Scleroderma*, but mutualistic, with interwoven mycelia].

⁶Green Elfcup

My thanks to Dr. Judith Oakley for communicating details from the early Minute Books of the Herefordshire Botanical Society.