

## FREDERIC ARTHUR STRATTON - A VICTORIAN BOTANIST

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**Abstract:** *Frederic Stratton was a solicitor and notable Island botanist. He held a number of important roles in civic society and ecclesiastical circles and made a major contribution to Frank Morey's Guide to the Natural History of the Isle of Wight.*

**Keywords:** Frederic Stratton, biography, Wild Flowers of the Isle of Wight

In September 1900 a slim booklet entitled "Wild Flowers of the Isle of Wight" priced 1 shilling, appeared. It was published jointly by the Isle of Wight County Press and Charles William Deacon & Co. a small-scale London publisher which flourished between 1890 and 1910. The author was Frederic Stratton F.L.S. In the Preface he stated: "So many requests come to me every year for information as to the Botany of the Isle of Wight that I thought it might be useful to those visitors to our Island, who are interested in wild flowers to have some fuller account than I could possibly spare time to give them by way of correspondence." Apart from a pen and ink drawing of a wild flower on the last printed page, the sole addition to the text is a contemporary map of the Island with place names, roads and railways drawn by John Bartholomew of Edinburgh. Such itineraries are frequently included in modern floras. The Flora of the Isle of Wight (1975) had a botanical calendar of seasonal highlights and the Island Habitats chapter of the Isle of Wight Flora (2003) details sites of particular interest.

Frederic Arthur Stratton was born on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 1840, the son of William and Sarah Stratton (née Tucker). William Stratton was a prominent builder in Newport, who was a member of Newport Borough Corporation (Eldridge p.92). His most enduring monument is St John's Church Newport, built between 1835 and 1837, where he acted as stonemason (Matthews p.13).

Little is known of Frederic's early life except that he was educated in private schools in Newport (Who's Who pp84-85). A major influence was his much older brother, William Tucker Stratton (1825-1899) who imparted both a deep knowledge of the Isle of Wight and endurance walking. Whereas William had a passion for historic buildings, Frederic's passion was for wild flowers. Such was his knowledge of flora and its habitat that he was elected a Fellow of the Linnaean Society in 1869. Apart from an encyclopædic knowledge of Isle of Wight Botany, in later life he acquired considerable knowledge of the Alpine flora from annual holidays in Switzerland. His other passion was landscape painting, both in oils and water colours, and he was a member of the Isle of Wight Fine Art Society.

Stratton was an articled clerk to James Eldridge, a leading solicitor of Newport; his articles were completed in 1863. There was no room for him in James Eldridge's firm, as Eldridge had two sons of his own who became his partners. At the age of 23, in 1863, he set up his own practice at 31 Pyle Street Newport. He would have practised mainly in conveyancing and probate, in common with most country solicitors. He was fortunate in obtaining

work from two family sources: his brother Robert was now carrying on his father's building business and his other brother, William, had established an architect's practice which eventually became known as Stratton and Millgate. Both his brothers would have provided him with clients.

Very astutely, he supplemented his private client income with a number of paid public offices. He was Clerk to the Isle of Wight Board of Guardians of the Poor from 1864 to 1903. This body was responsible for the maintenance of the Forest House workhouse, the maintenance of the infirmary and the grant of poor relief. The workhouse building still exists, as part of the South Hospital at St Mary's. A subsidiary body was the Union Assessment Committee which dealt with valuations of properties for rating purposes; Stratton was the paid Clerk. He became Clerk to the Newport and Carisbrooke School Boards which administered elementary school buildings. It provided subsidies to Church schools, ran non-denominational schools and enforced school attendance. The latter function brought Stratton into Court, prosecuting parents who had failed to send their children to school.

He was also Clerk to the Isle of Wight Rural Sanitary District, a rudimentary statutory body dealing with public health issues in rural districts. This developed into the Isle of Wight Rural District Council, Stratton being the first Clerk to the Council between 1894 and 1896. He was also Superintendent Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths for the Island.

On his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1865, Stratton married Ellen Eldridge (1845-1933), the daughter of his old Principal, at St Thomas Church, Newport. Through his wife, Stratton became connected to the Pittis family who dominated the business and administrative life of Newport between 1850 and 1950. (Matthews, Pittis lecture).

He now had family links with three other solicitors' firms. His wife's father and two brothers were the partners of James Eldridge & Sons. Another of his wife's cousins was Richard Roach Pittis, who practised as a sole practitioner. A more distant relative of his wife was William Tucker Way Buckell whose practice eventually became known as Buckell & Drew. Stratton may have already been directly related to him through his mother's family the Tuckers. In addition, his wife's uncle and cousin were partners of the powerful auctioneer's firm of Francis Pittis & Son (later Sir Francis Pittis & Son).

Two members of the extended family, James Eldridge and Richard Roach Pittis, were successively Town Clerks of Newport Borough Corporation, while in the 50 years between 1847 and 1897, the

family provided 19 Mayors. (Matthews, Pittis lecture) The firm of Stratton subsequently became Stratton & Sons when two of his sons, Henry Eldridge Stratton (1868-1949) and George Edward Stratton (1885-1937) joined the practice. Frederic Stratton remained in practice despite health problems until 1914, two years before his death. On the death of H.E. Stratton in 1949, the firm was acquired by the unrelated Eric Angelo McCullagh, and in 1951 it merged with James Eldridge & Sons.

Frederic and Sarah had a very happy marriage and they produced 11 children, four sons and seven daughters. Stratton and three of his sons have entries in *Who's Who in the Isle of Wight* (1913); the 4<sup>th</sup> son Hugh had died in childhood, aged 4, in 1876. Apart from the two sons who were solicitors, his second son was the Rev. Arthur Carruthers Stratton (1871-1941) who was originally an Assistant Secretary of the Church Missionary Society and then Vicar of St John's Church Newport between 1909 and 1913.

Several of his seven daughters were prominent Church Missionary Society missionaries. Maud (1866-1941) was a missionary to Zenana women in Muttra India between 1892 and 1922; Winifred (1874-1949) served in Freetown Sierra Leone 1899-1905; Theodora (1876-1958) was in India from the late 1890s to 1916 and Constance (1882-1946) served with her husband in Japan between 1908 and 1940 and then in Jamaica 1942-1946. (Matthews pp205-207 and pp210-215)

Stratton was a devout Anglican. He was a Lay Reader at St John's Church Newport and a member of the Winchester Diocesan and the Isle of Wight Rural Deconal Conferences. The extent of his devotion to his faith is depicted in the very eccentric book *"From My Diaries"* by his son H.E. Stratton published by the Isle of Wight County Press in 1946. Looking back to the 1880s (Diaries Preface iv-v), Henry wrote "The Victorian Sunday was one long day of services, teachings and worship commencing at 6 o'clock or perhaps 7 o'clock early service. To many it was a blessed relief when it was over".

The day proceeded with Sunday School class, morning service, afternoon Bible class or Sunday School class, and open-air service at Shide. Frederic and his brother in law, not named but almost certainly James Eldridge, 12 years older than him, would then walk ten miles to and from Cowes to conduct a mission service in a Mission Hall. They were the last to own penny-farthing bicycles in the Island, but did not feel able to use them as it was considered sinful. "(We) had discussed placarding them machines for which they were not on pleasure bent taking their pleasure on God's holy day, but only going on missionary work." But "...even the appearance of evil must be definitely avoided".

Stratton's book on Wild Flowers is a tiny publication, able to be fitted in a pocket. Nominally 20 pages, in reality it contains 17 pages of print, including the Preface on the first page. Although it does not say so, the book concentrates on rare or uncommon flowers. Although he does not set it out as such, the book is a description of a number of walks on the Island of varying lengths, itemising the flowers to be

seen. Current English names have been substituted in this article as Stratton mostly used Latin names, some of which have been superseded. He makes comment on the distribution and abundance for some species and also refers to possible causes of the decline of species where he has not recently seen them.

The first walk starts in East Street Newport, proceeds to Great Pan Farm and Arreton Down and returns via Lynn Common and Staplers; much of the first part of the walk is now covered by the Pan Estate.

He lists Rue-leaved Saxifrage on the walls of Ford Mill, Monk's-hood in a stream near Pan Mill, Gipsywort "*not common*" in Ford Mill pond, and Small-Flowered Buttercup along Pan Lane. Grass Vetchling is described as being "*on a damp corner near the farm-house*" and "*very scarce in the Island*", Ivy-Leaved Crowfoot and Whorl Grass are "*in a pool under some oaks*". Columbine and Sweet Woodruff are in woods on edge of chalk and Dwarf Mouse-Ear "*in ruts and broken ground*". Further on, Fly Orchid is at Combley; Greater Broomrape on Lynn Common "*amongst the Broom and Furze*", Pale Violet at Staplers "*where draining of the land has not banished it*" and Water Starwort and Lungwort in woods near Staplers. Stratton then breaks off to describe Danish Scurvy Grass, Slender Hare's-ear and Knotted Clover at King's Quay.

His second walk starts as a boat ride along the Medina, and then a walk from Cowes to Gurnard and back to Newport. Plants listed along the river are English Scurvy Grass, Celery Leaf Buttercup ("*very rare*") Slender Hare's-ear, Stiff Saltmarsh Grass, Golden Samphire, Townsend's Cord Grass, Small Cord Grass, and Marsh Mallow.

At Gurnard, Sweet Nancy "*plentiful in one field on west side of the bay*", Elecampane "*looking very much at home at the head of the marsh*" and Pale Butterwort ("*much affected by drainage*") are listed. On the return journey he mentions Pale Toadflax on the road to Newport, and in Parkhurst Forest, Narrow-Leaved Lungwort.

The third walk is extremely long and starts from Westminster Mill Newport, then via Carisbrooke Churchyard and Castle and Calbourne to Freshwater Bay returning via Headon Warren, Colwell, Norton, Yarmouth, Thorley and Newtown).

Plants observed by Stratton include Rigid Hornwort at Westminster Mill, the only locality on the Island, Marsh Valerian "*scarce in a withy bed*" and Maidenhair Spleenwort in Carisbrooke Churchyard "*though in great danger of extirpation by thoughtless collectors*". Rustyback fern and Common Calamint were seen at the Castle. English Galingale was in a marshy meadow near Apes Down where "*may yet keep its ground, in spite of draining*", Cat-mint "*on the ridge of the downs*" and "*on the slope of the down at the south of Westover*" was Field Fleawort "*at its only station in Wight*". White Helleborine was to be found in a beechwood nearby and was noted as "*scarce*". At Freshwater Bay, Stratton recorded White Horehound, Common Centaury, Field Gentian ("*very rare*"), Hoary Stock (on chalk cliffs) Rock Samphire, Sea Radish, Clustered Bellflower and Dropwort ("*rare*").

He stated that Freshwater Gate was one of the best localities for wild flowers in the Island "...but it has been sadly ruined...by the advance of civilisation"; nevertheless he recorded Greater Bladderwort, Bog Asphodel, and Marsh Fern and noted that "Flowering Rush has maintained its place near the Rectory for at least the last fifty-four years". Greater Spearwort was also found in the same stream, and Stratton hoped that Blunt-flowered Rush and Marsh Valerian "may still remain."

On Headon Hill he found Chaffweed, Heath Pearlwort and Sea Stork's-bill. On slipped land near Totland Bay, Marsh Helleborine was growing.

Stratton deals with extinct plants. On Colwell Heath, Field Gentian had been plentiful in 1823 but was last seen in 1879. Pale butterwort was last seen by him in 1869. Reed Sweet-grass had its sole Island locality at Colwell but not seen since 1886. He also noted Allseed and Chaffweed at this site.

At Norton, he found Sea Kale, Sand Cat's-tail and Sea Bindweed "on a small extent of blown sand". At Yarmouth, he lists Nettle-leaved Goosefoot and at Thorley, Oak-leaved Goosefoot and Rat's-tail Fescue.

At Newtown he highlighted the fragility of plant forms. The late A G More had discovered Foxtail Stonewort in 1862 in salt pans, but it was last seen in 1869 by Stratton. The salt pans were abandoned in 1870; it was re-discovered in 1881 by Mr Charles Bailey but not seen since. Newtown was the only British locality. Stratton comments:

*"There is much hope that the plant still lingers and the spores may be lying in wait for a favourable opportunity of germinating. Search should always be made for it."*

He did however find Slender Hare's-ear and Sea Heath.

The fourth walk was quite short and took in Brading and St Helens. Plants listed are Whorl-Grass (at Brading Railway station), Mare's-tail at its only habitat in the Island, Tuberous Foxtail, and Reticulated Medick (on dry walls of the old Brading Quay). Lesser Fleabane was at St Helens Green; Pennyroyal had previously been seen here but was now considered extinct. A boggy area on the north-west of the Green had Marsh St John's Wort Sundew, Bog Pimpernel, Marsh Willowherb, Marsh Bedstraw, Few Flowered Spike Rush, Slender Club Rush, and Pale Dog Violet.

St Helens Spit he thought was unequalled anywhere else in the British Isles; on one small extent of ground he found 250 species growing. The small plot around the Old Church included Few-flowered Buttercup, Small Mallow, Ray's Knotweed, Sea Pearlwort, Toothed Medick, Birds-foot Clover, Hare's-foot Clover, Rough Clover, Clustered Clover, Suffocated Clover, Parsley Water Dropwort, Autumn Squill, Sea Spurge (sown by Bromfield in 1848) Common Fescue, Bulbous Meadow-grass (a rare grass) Sea Wormwood, Grass Vetchling and Knotted Pearlwort.

Stratton remarked that Ryde was a poor area for Botany, although there had been many rare plants on the Duver, (now known as The Strand) such as Childing Pink, he considered it lost to the Island. He

stated the best places for rare flora in the area were Quarr, Fishbourne and Dame Anthony's Common.

Sandown, on the other hand, was good for plants, particularly rare trefoils. Stratton found Purple Broomrape, Yarrow, Wild Onion, Spring Vetch on Red Cliff; Portland Spurge and Rough Bedstraw were on the chalk cliffs. Walking towards and beyond Brading, he found Yellow Bartsia on rough pasture - the only place on the Island, Yellow Cress at Harding-shoot, (now Hardingshute) a single tree of Juniper at Nunwell, Climbing Fumitory, Marsh Violet, Marsh Willowherb, White Beak Sedge were growing on the marshes of the Eastern Yar. This area was also the only Island habitat of Small Water Pepper.

Starting a walk near Shanklin, he found Thick-leaved Stonecrop on the roof of a cottage at Merry Gardens, Wood Vetch in Luccombe Copse, Wall Lettuce at Cowpit Cliff, and Moonwort ("*a very rare plant in Wight*"), in a field north of Cook's Castle. Pendulous Sedge was notable in Shanklin Chine. Between Shanklin Down and Ventnor, he noted that Stag's-horn Clubmoss used to grow in its only Island habitat and he "*hoped that this rare plant may be re-discovered*". On the Landslip, he found Spider Orchid, Bee Orchid and Ivy Broomrape.

In the final walk from Ventnor to Niton and then inland to the Wilderness. he listed Broad Leaved Helleborine, Marsh Helleborine, Italian Arum ("*a very rare plant and probably only British habitat*"), Field Cow Wheat, Sweet Cyperus, and Hound's-tongue. On the moors between Niton and Chale, he found Royal Fern over 5 feet tall "much diminished in splendour by the ravages of collectors". In The Wilderness, he noted Bog Myrtle, Cranberry, Marsh Fern, Bog Pimpernel, Navelwort (at Bohemia) Birds Nest Orchid, Yellow Birds Nest ("*very rare*") and the three heaths found on the Island, Bell Heather, Cross Leaved Heath and Common Heather.

His booklet finishes

*"From the foregoing brief notes it will be seen that from the earliest days of Spring when the botanist sallies forth to find Hellebore and Butcher's Broom in flower to the last days of the year, when the Spindle-tree is covered with*

*The fruit,*

*Which in our winter woodland looks like a flower',*

*there is ample opportunity for botanising on this favoured Isle....deserves a high place in the list of happy hunting grounds not only for Geologists, Entomologists and Ornithologists but also lovers of wild plants"*

In the Preface to the book, Stratton appealed for any records of dates and places of plants not previously known to the Island, as he had an ambition to publish a complete Flora of the Island. He was particularly interested in Brambles and Roses; these critical groups, which are difficult to identify, would need to be included in a Flora.

In 1865, Stratton acquired a copy of William Bromfield's *Flora Vectensis* which he annotated copiously for the rest of his life. This book is now in the Natural History Museum in London (Allen, in Pope et al. 2003). This was a common recording

method of the time. He also built up a herbarium of pressed plant specimens, some of which are now accessible via [herbariaunited.org](http://herbariaunited.org). This was not just for his own interest but enabled a wider range of botanists to share and comment on his discoveries via the London Botanical Exchange Club.

Stratton's dream was realised in 1909 when the monumental "A Guide to the Natural History of the Isle of Wight" edited by Frank Morey appeared. Stratton's health had deteriorated from 1904 but his contribution was acknowledged by Morey who discussed the formation of the book "with my friend Mr Frederic Stratton", the only contributor mentioned in such a way. In his introduction to the contributors, Morey paid a glowing tribute to Stratton

*"The list of Flowering Plants and Ferns is compiled by Mr. Stratton whose long experience as an Island botanist rendered him peculiarly fitted for this task"* (Morey xvii).

The section on Flowering Plants, at 73 pages, was by far the longest section in the book. (Morey pp 126-199).

In introducing his section, Stratton stated

*"Probably there is no place in the British Isles in which the study of Natural History could be more readily pursued than the Isle of Wight. Certainly there are few if any areas the size of the Island which contains so large a number of wild plants."* (Morey p126)

The Island with its area of about 93,000 acres recorded 1032 species, not including sub-species, or mosses, liverworts, lichen, fungi and algae. In the whole of Britain, the number of plants calculated in a similar manner was 1958.

The reason for this wealth was the numerous geological strata.

*"Though it would not probably be found that each separate stratum has a special flora of its own, we may certainly recognise the characteristic plants of the clays, the chalk and the sands"* (Morey p127).

The Island flora was not generally different from that of Hampshire, although Hampshire had 148 plants not found in the Island and the Island had 21 plants not found in Hampshire.

Stratton set out a list of authorities similar to that in his own book, but modestly makes no mention of his book. Then follows a complete listing of Island plants. They are first split into families; then their Latin (Linnaean) name is given, followed by common English names, often more than one for each plant. The date and location of habitats is given, followed by a statement as to whether the plant is abundant or rare. Occasionally, species are recorded as once found, but now extinct.

Stratton's health continued to decline. He died at his home, Mount Pleasant House in Newport on the 4<sup>th</sup> December 1916 aged 76. The funeral was conducted at St John's Church Newport on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1916 conducted by the Vicar Rev. W. H. Mackinnon (who had succeeded his son) the assisted by the Curate, Rev E. W. T. Greenshield, the famous Arctic missionary.

With his overwhelming passion for wild flowers

Frederic Stratton, more than anyone else, brought to public attention the riches of the Island's natural habitat.

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**Fig. 1** Headstone of Frederic Stratton and his wife Ellen, in the flower-rich chalk grassland of Mount Joy Cemetery, Newport. Photo: Keith Marston