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Davey, Frederick Hamilton (1868 – 1915)

Posted on April 12, 2013 by Selina Bates and Keith Spurgin

Frederick Hamilton Davey was born on 10th September 1868 in the Cornish village of Ponsanooth, the 12th child of Emma (née Trengove) and Stephen Henry Davey, manager of an arsenic works. Fred Davey left school at the age of 11 and worked in the nearby Kennall Vale gunpowder factory. In the village there was much interest in natural history. Davey attended a class run by the well-known naturalist Canon Saltren Rogers and soon became fond of wandering the lanes and fields in his spare time, making notes on birds, insects and plants.

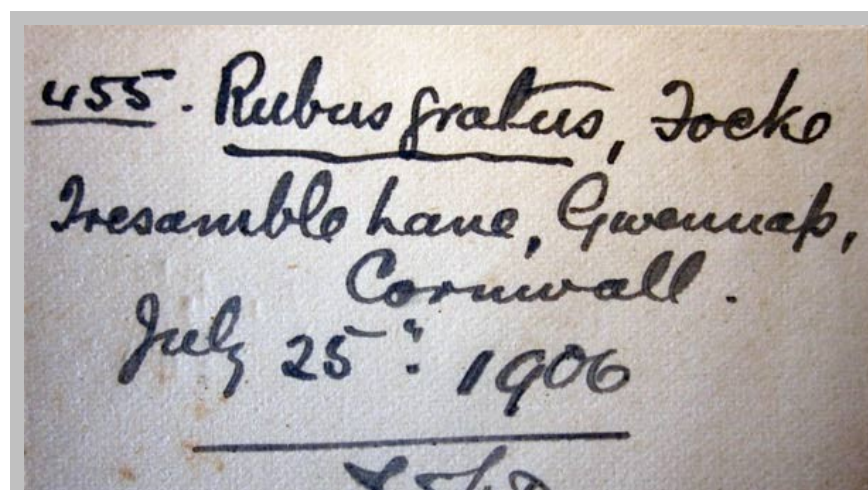
At the age of 17, he suffered a severe attack of rheumatic fever and was left with a weak heart. He spent much of his time making close observations in his garden and eventually in the surrounding countryside. At the age of 23, he exhibited his collection of grasses, sedges and rushes at the Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society; and was praised by the judges – “*well selected, well mounted and carefully named*”. Davey returned to work as a book-keeper but still kept up his keen interest in the natural world.

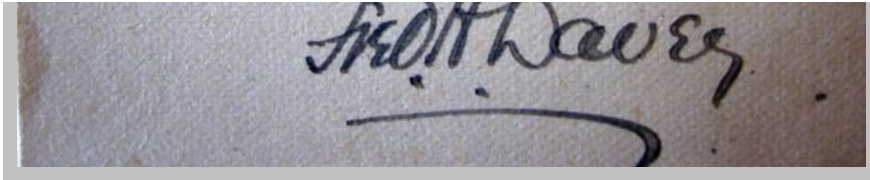
Again he fell ill and was no longer able to work and – having the freedom to pursue his obsession – seemed destined to adopt a role that others of a quite different background assumed as part of their everyday life. Eventually he found part-time work, keeping the books at the arsenic factory and writing occasional pieces for the local papers. He continued to collect plants and became well known as a writer of articles on a variety of natural history subjects. In 1899, **Allan Octavian Hume** met Davey and persuaded him to write a Flora of Cornwall. In 1902 Davey’s *Tentative List* was published and the following year he became the Linnean Society’s youngest member. His *Flora of Cornwall* was published in 1909, to favourable reviews.

“... the skilled labour of ten years bound up in a volume which the crowd will never see but which will live in the halls of science and be numbered among the botanical classics.” **The Daily Mail**

In 1911, Davey was invited to become a founder Fellow of Hume’s **South London Botanical Institute**. Later in the year he led the International Phytogeographical Congress, attended by botanists from Europe and the U.S.A., on a series of field trips to Cornish habitats including the Lizard.

Davey died a fortnight after his 47th birthday. As news of his death became known, people throughout Cornwall gathered wild flowers from fields and hedgerows, to send to the Wesleyan Chapel, Ponsanooth.

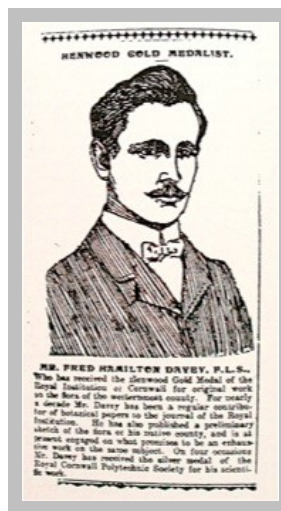




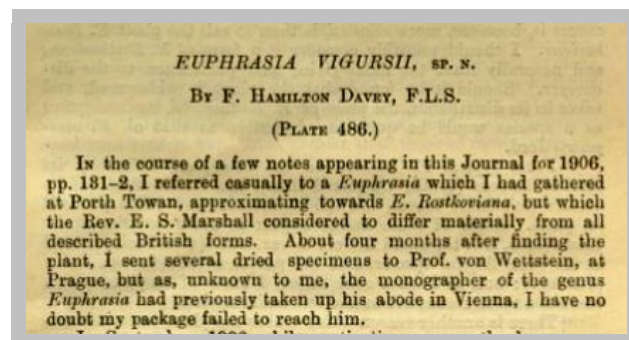
Davey's beautifully prepared and presented herbarium of about 4,000 sheets is kept at the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, Cornwall, England.

Mention should here be made of a handsome *Euphrasia* which I found in comparative plenty at Porth Towan, on June 21st. It is closely allied to *E. Rostkoviana*, but is less branched, less glandular, and has a larger corolla, of a deep violet colour. Fresh specimens were sent to the Rev. E. S. Marshall, who expressed the opinion that it differed from all described British forms. I have since forwarded dried specimens to Prof. Wettstein, and am awaiting his reply.

The first reference to *Euphrasia vigursii* Davey, discovered at Porthtowan, West Cornwall, v.c. 1. (Davey, F.H., 1906. *Additions to the flora of Cornwall, Journal of Botany*, **64**, p. 132)



Left : [Davey in 1905, courtesy of the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro](#)



Snippet from : *Journal of Botany* 1907

Post by **Selina Bates** and **Keith Spurgin**, authors of:

Stars in the grass: the life of Frederick Hamilton Davey 1868-1915,

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