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Purchas, William Henry (Rev) 1828 – 1908.

Posted on [June 22, 2011](#) by [Chris](#)



Draft :

William Purchas was born in December, 1828 in Ross, Herefordshire. His father was a wine merchant, and as the eldest son he was expected to follow in the family business. However, it had always been his desire to follow a religious vocation. As his father's health was not strong, he agreed to working in the family wine business for some years until his younger brothers could succeed him.

Meanwhile, he helped found a Sunday School at Ross and was also secretary to the Church Missionary Society. However, by 1855, he was able to attend Durham University and, in 1857, was ordained to the Ministry of the Church of England. He worked unremittingly in its service until he died in 1908.

He worked in a number of areas :

1857 – 1865 Tickenhall, Derbyshire

1865 Lydney, Gloucestershire

1866 – 70 Gloucester

1870 – 1908 Alstonfield, Staffordshire.

From his childhood days, he had shown an interest and aptitude for natural history, and whilst at school collected butterflies though botany was always an interest. Apparently his elders used to complain that it was impossible to walk with him as he was always stopping to examine things in the hedgerows.

He was one of the founders of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club (established in the winter of 1851 – 52), which introduced many locally and others more widely to the 'scientific and archaeological treasures' of Herefordshire. By this time, his knowledge of botany was not inconsiderable and he was in touch with many leading British botanists.

He mapped Herefordshire into 14 distinct districts, carefully describing the topography, geology etc of each; this was eventually to lead to his "Flora of Herefordshire", completed in conjunction with the Revd Augustin Ley. The two men worked together for many years until the Flora was published in 1889, even though from 1870 Purchas was based in Staffordshire. The *Preface* to the Flora gives an account of how the work 'evolved' over this time.

On his move to Derbyshire, he developed an interest in the genus *Rosa*; and expressed some concern as to the 'artificial' though ingenious arrangement of certain taxons. Some of his specific botanical observations were never published but passed on in conversations, for example, on the loss of the terminal bud in certain *Salix* species so that new growth begins with the first lateral bud or the description of the untwisting of the capsule in the genus *Orchis* – on the ripening of the seeds. He also deliberated on the various forms of *Epipactis* (see *Flora of Herefordshire* p.298).

He published papers in the *Botanical Gazette* (between 1849 – 1851), the *Phytologist* (old series), and the *Journal*

of *Botany* between 1865 – 1895; he contributed to Watson’s *Topographical Botany* and sent many notes to the **London Botanical Exchange Club**. From 1995 onwards, he published a number of papers in ***Science Gossip*** on “[The characteristic branching of British Forest Trees](#)”

He died December 16th, 1908.

Information from obituary written by A. Ley, texts from Archive.org

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