

## A book of ferns, Arran, June 1858

R.S.L. Griffith

Trewithen, 1 Chapelton Terrace, Stewarton KA3 3ED

E-mail: [rgriffithk@aol.com](mailto:rgriffithk@aol.com)

The author purchased from a Glasgow-based antiquarian book dealer a bespoke elephant folio size herbarium album with specimens collected from June 1858 to at least February 1861. This comprises ninety-six pages with over one hundred and sixty pressed ferns from Scotland, Wales, England, the West Indies, Jamaica, South America, China, Japan, Norfolk Island, Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, and Madagascar. The heavy paper sheets have glued-on acid-free tissue paper, and the whole is bound into a red decorated album with half leather and half calico covering and with a richly marbled inside board and first page. The album cover has "BRITISH FERNS" embossed centrally on the cover in gold lettering (Fig. 1), and a bookshop label records that it was made by Robert Forrester based in Stockwell Street, Glasgow. The collector is not identified apart from being a resident on the Isle of Arran in June 1858. The only named person is a "Stephen Powell Esq.", who receives several acknowledgements, and who supplied various specimens from Australia and New Zealand, indicating that the album's creator either corresponded with others, travelled widely or both.

The ferns appear to be displayed in the order in which they were personally collected or obtained, regardless of the country of origin, classification relationships, etc., and they are identified via a mixture of attached printed labels, copperplate writing, pencilled annotations and a few hastily written temporary labels attached to the pressed plants themselves (Fig. 2A-D). The capitalisation convention is not always used for genus and species names, and spelling errors are present, suggesting that the collector was an untrained amateur. Dates and locations are very rarely or imprecisely recorded and the rarity status of specimens is provided on only a few occasions. The identifying characteristics are, however, well represented on the sheets and the specimens are well prepared and firmly attached with thin glued paper strips. Species collected on Arran dominate at first, those from mainland sites follow, such as green spleenwort (*Asplenium viride*) from Dunoon in September 1859 (Fig. 2A), and later a random mixture of British and foreign specimens is present. Attached sheets of course restrict the ability to organise a collection made over time.

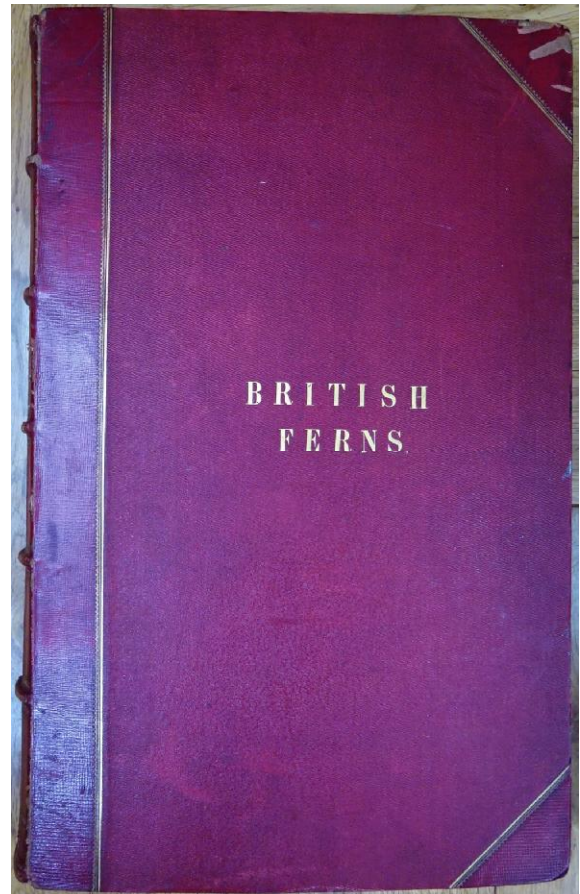


Fig. 1. Front cover of the book of ferns. (Photo: R.S. L. Griffith)

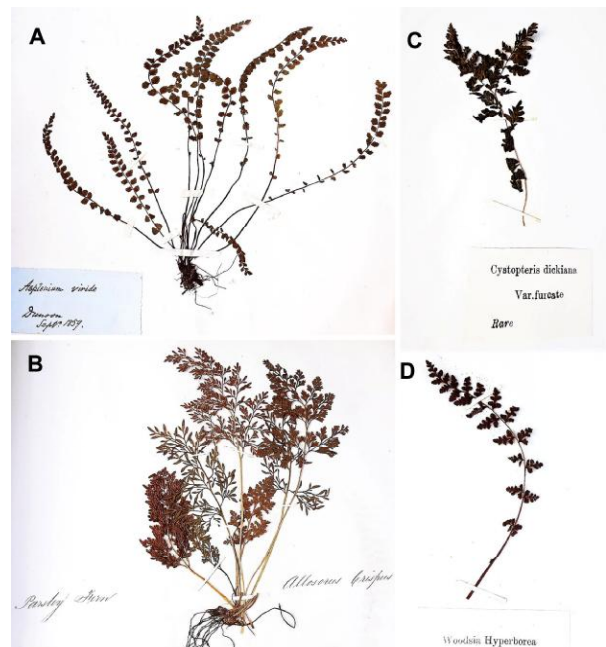


Fig. 2. A selection of specimens from the book of ferns. (A) Green spleenwort *Asplenium viride*, Dunoon, 1859. (B) Parsley fern *Cryptogramma crispata*. (C) Dickie's bladder fern *Cystopteris dickiana* var. *furcata*. (D) Alpine woodsia *Woodsia alpina*, Ben Lawers. (Photos: R.S.L. Griffith)

A significant number of visually impressive foreign ferns are present and a good representative selection of British species, including the filmy ferns and two species which are now considered extinct in Britain, namely the alpine bladder fern (*Cystopteris alpina*), only ever known from a site in Upper Teesdale, England and extinct since 1911, and the fountain spleenwort (*Asplenium fontanum*), once occurring at several sites. A furcate and a normal specimen of Dickie's bladder fern (*Cystopteris dickieana*) are present, now known only from several cave sites near Aberdeen (Fig. 2C). A number of depauperate, furcate specimens and other sports or varieties of British species are present and, as would be expected, many of the species are given common names and/or binomials that are no longer officially recognised, such as "Bree's fern", which was labelled "*Lophodium foeniseicii*", i.e. hay-scented buckler fern (*Dryopteris aemula*). Some pages carry two or more different unrelated species, several duplicates are present, and some ferns are not identified. A few club mosses are included, such as *Selaginella umbrosa*.

Hennedy's *Clydesdale Flora* (Hennedy, 1865) illustrates how much easier it was for Victorian collectors to find what are now uncommon, rare or locally extinct species in the Scottish context, due initially to the effects of pteridomania as exemplified by this collection. The effect was even greater on rare varieties of rare species. For example, eventually the whole of the original colony of the furcate variety of Dickie's bladder fern was collected to extinction. Alpine woodsia (*Woodsia alpina*) (Fig. 2D), was avidly collected and it has as a result vanished altogether from two hectads near Crianlarich. Famously, an attempt in Wales to acquire this plant for a collector led to the death in 1861 of William Williams, a renowned Snowdonia mountain guide. Oblong woodsia (*Woodsia ilvensis*), has likewise been lost from a hectad in the Moffat Hills, its only location in the Scottish lowlands.

The last dated specimen in the collection is from February 1861, a number of identified and pressed specimens were not mounted, and nearly forty pages remain blank suggesting a sudden termination of collecting. The robust album is in good condition despite showing signs of frequent use. The collector was clearly a dedicated enthusiast who sought rare specimens and had contacts with other collectors. However, the lack of a progression towards scientific methodology suggests this individual was neither a member of learned natural history societies nor keen to contribute scientific information in the form of species records, etc.

#### REFERENCE

Hennedy, R. (1865). *The Clydesdale Flora*. David Robertson, Glasgow.