

Wyre Forest Study Group

George Jorden (1783-1871).

An Appreciation

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Anyone interested in the natural history of the Wyre Forest area will have heard of those who have made a contribution to the knowledge of the area, thinking of Norman Hickin and Neville Wilde. One name from the nineteenth century, George Jorden, may not be so well known but he made a huge contribution to our early knowledge of the area. Although he had interests in many natural sciences he is perhaps remembered most for his knowledge of botany and in particular his association with one tree, the Whitty Pear or Sorb Tree *Sorbus domestica*. George was a remarkable man and was one of the first people to record the natural history of the Wyre Forest area noting all sorts of disciplines from botany to geology and from folklore to man's development of the town of Bewdley. This article explores the legacy he has left, what sort of man he was and where he came from.

At a time, even before Victorian values and discoveries drove the quest for knowledge of the world, George had, through self education and study, become a very competent naturalist but principally a botanist. At a time when it was usually the landed gentry or the clergy who had the time and education to explore the new sciences, he had taught himself to read and write and observe natural events. Born in 1783 in Farlow, Shropshire, George was the eldest of four boys and three girls and most of the extended family lived in a triangle bounded by Farlow, Oreton and Stottesdon, lying just east of the Clee Hills. George left home early in life and having arrived in Bewdley, worked as an errand boy and servant to a surgeon, Mr Seager. Working there for about eight years he had started to teach himself to read and write but an argument with the cook in the house meant he had to move out (Wedley).

In 1806 George moved to No. 7 Load Street to work for another surgeon, James Fryer. This was to be a significant move as he remained in that position until 1856 when Fryer died, appearing on the 1841 and 1851 census as a house servant. George obviously got on well with Fryer and it was there that he was able to foster his interests in all sorts of aspects of natural history. Fryer must have encouraged an atmosphere of enquiry and education being a trained surgeon and he was a keen astronomer himself. Upon his death Fryer provided for George both in monetary terms and also left him some property in Lax Lane. George continued to live in No. 7 Load Street for a further 15 years as a lodger until his death in 1871. In the 1861 census he is entered as living with Ann Mills a Glass and China dealer and finally in 1871 he is found as a retired servant lodging with John Ince a china dealer. This is actually the year that George died and the fact

that a Mary Jorden is living there at the same time perhaps implies George was unwell as she was the 55 year old wife of George's nephew, another George and in every other census either side of 1871 Mary is on the farm with her husband at Oreton. So this was George's life working as a servant, spending all his spare time exploring the Wyre Forest and the Shropshire area around his birthplace, recording all the plants in that area. He spent 65 years in the same house and apparently had a small garden area where he could experiment with his various collections. Many of those plants were carefully collected and pressed to form a collection, some of which are to be seen in the City of Worcester Museum. By the mid 1840s George had become so expert that he was consulted about plants in the area and through these contacts met people like Edwin Lees and William Mathews, founder members of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club (WNC).

The first outing George made with members of the Club was in the summer of 1847 when Edwin Lees was taken by William Mathews to visit the Wyre Forest. It was at Park Hall, Kidderminster where William Mathews, Edwin Lees and James Buckman met and formulated the idea of forming a Naturalists' Club. Also at that meeting Mathews had suggested they find George to show them the forest. This they did but apparently he insisted on them seeing his bramble collection in his garden first. George managed Fryer's garden as well as his other household duties but was allowed to have



Dr James Fryer (1769-1856)

Courtesy of Bewdley Town Council

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an area of his own. Very soon George was to join the WNC in 1855 being the 25th member and remaining so until his death. Obviously George became popular with Lees and the other naturalists as he was invariably their guide on their visits to the Forest.

It may be difficult to imagine how George managed to develop a scientific knowledge considering his humble beginnings, but he had a number of things in his favour. Firstly, his mother Ann was a noted local herbalist and she was apparently so eminently skilled in their uses that she was able to help cure Scrofula (possibly a form of tuberculosis), with the help of the herb Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*). This information and much more George wrote in his diaries from 1822-66. Unfortunately there is no trace of these diaries at the present time, but there are some extracts from them in F.R. Jeffery's, 'Gleanings from the diaries of a Bewdley Naturalist' which appeared in the Transactions of the WNC in 1921. Secondly George lived in the house of James Fryer (1769-1856) who was a local surgeon who had a very keen interest in the sciences particularly chemistry, electricity and astronomy according to George's own diary. Fryer was a vital member of the community, an eminent physician and philanthropist who left large sums of money to the local National School, Worcester Infirmary and Far Forest Church where he has a memorial window. This must have generated a climate of research and knowledge which George thrived on, helping him develop his own interests in the natural sciences.

Drawing again on Jeffery's account of Jorden we get a glimpse of George the man. Jeffery says he recalled being in the company of George on several occasions and one when his party met George somewhere in the Forest, Edwin Lees exclaimed "Hello, capital, here's Jordan"! Jeffery goes on to say "he remembered George as a stoutly built old man of modest appearance but that hid a rather distinguished man in his own field".

The Diaries start in 1822 and Jeffery says that already there are signs that George was a keen botanist. By 1844 George was submitting specimens to the Worcester Natural History Society and Worcester Museum and there are three occasions when this was done in the next two years according to items in the Worcester Journal. Later in 1851 this self-taught man is seen giving a lecture on Botany in Bewdley telling a story of 50 years of interest in the subject. His contribution to the knowledge of the plants in the Bewdley area and around his birthplace in Shropshire, are seen in the lists in the Shropshire Flora (Leighton) and Worcestershire Flora (Lees). After the initial meeting with the WNC, Jeffery notes from George's

diary that he attended the fifth meeting of the Club at Lower Areley and Ribbesford in 1848, a meeting with just two others Mr Thompson and Mr Mathews due to unfavourable weather. It was noted with regret by George that Mr Edwin Lees did not attend and that was a loss. The small party retired to lunch at James Fryer's House, No. 7 Load Street, Bewdley, where George lived and worked.

Providing herbs in James Fryer's garden, George obviously found space to grow his various plants like the brambles and others and he didn't confine himself to botany, also observing parasitic behaviour. In the Phytologist Vol 3, he writes that he has seen a parasite emerge on various occasions as a growth from the roots of a Filbert tree in his garden. This was Toothwort, *Lathraea squamaria*. He also commented in the Phytologist Vol 6, on a plague of what he believed to be The Green Oak Tortrix Moth, *Tortrix viridaria*, which were ravaging the Wyre Forest oak trees during the hot summer of 1862. It was also in this volume that he announced to the world that the Old Sorb tree had been destroyed.

Contributing regularly to the Phytologist he describes fairy rings in Vol 6 and here he shows that he is now not shackled by old superstition and begins to explore the world of Mycology. He quotes a number of old remedies but says pragmatically that rather than try to treat a hernia by passing the afflicted through the slit branch of an ash tree, it would be better to simply bind the diseased part and hope nature takes its course.

He made some original discoveries of importance as well as helped clarify the difficult family of brambles. He was the first person to describe the difference between the two thymes, *Thymus pulegioides* and *T. serpyllum* and obviously met with some opposition initially because he says in the Phytologist Vol 4 that "should botanists not be able to tell them apart, the sheep will, being the better phytologists as they will readily eat *T. serpyllum*, but will not touch the other, on account of its pungency".

Again referring to the diaries Jorden liked to record Mistletoe where it grew, like today's naturalists, and notes that it was seen on the Black Poplars along the Severn near Stourport as well as the usual Italian Poplars. Interestingly he thinks this is unusual as well as commenting that Black Poplars were dying out even then. Many plants mentioned in these diaries were newly recorded to the area but the one plant forever intertwined with Jorden is the Whitty Pear or True Service Tree. This tree was known after Alderman Pitt described its discovery in the Wyre Forest in 1677. Unknown at the time anywhere else in the country

it was always a great mystery as to how it got there. When the remains of a building were found nearby it was conjectured that it had a connection with a hermit. The tree was odd as it presented a strange mixture of characters in that the foliage was like a Rowan tree but the fruit was damson sized and pear shaped. It is not certain when George first knew about it, but he had taken Lees to see it in 1847, and he describes it perhaps slightly dismissively in his *Botany of Wyre* (Phytologist vol 1 1855) as: "The wood of this tree is very hard; the fruit is not edible in any state, it is so very astringent and it so astringes the mouth and fauces as to render it next to impossible to swallow a particle of it. It is very probable that this tree or the fruit, came from Normandy originally." Despite the description Jorden had a great love for the tree and condemned the way it was treated by passers by. It had become a good luck charm and so bits were regularly snatched as a talisman. There is no doubt that the tree was nearly always visited by the WNC, led by Jorden when they were in the Wyre, and the sense of anger comes out in George's letter to the Phytologist (Vol. 6). In it he writes "I am sorry to inform you that some evil-disposed person has burnt down the poor old Sorb, the pride of Wyre Forest, a tree which has been an object of attraction for more than two centuries". He ends that part of the letter by quoting from the Bible (Peter V 3 v 10) which paraphrases into 'you won't enjoy life if you speak or do evil things'. There was also the hint that something was going to be made of the remains of the tree as he says of the remains, better things are reserved. Sure enough it was from pieces that George collected, that various items were made, such as goblets. Two of these are mentioned in another article in this Review on the following pages. George also wanted to replant a tree on the original site as it was known that a viable tree was growing nearby at Arley Castle taken from the original tree.

The diaries go on and recount many superstitions and traditions and sayings from around Bewdley. He also has a section when he was obviously in a very happy state, enjoying the wonders of the area on a beautiful May day with hedges full of blossom, skylarks and nightingales singing and Bewdley as he says "so admired a garden of flora" and he writes the verse:

"From morns bright dawn, until the evening close,
Amid thy groves dear Bewdley could I roam.
Amid thy flowery groves, and through thy richly and
enamelled meads
That borders Sabrina's fair stream, and how from
floras numerous tribes
I'll cull the choicest jems, my herbarium to adorn
O mans no greater bliss than for over hours to roam
To wonder, contemplate and admire, these
wondrous works.
Wisdom and goodness of the majesty of the
universe."

This also happens to be the opening page of a section of notes that is housed in Kidderminster Library called the *Flora Bellus Locus*. This section systematically goes through the plants around Bewdley describing their distribution. When Jeffery rediscovered this work, Carlton Rea, another great Botanist in Worcestershire, was able to check and add some new locations for plants that were formerly unclear.

Apart from the *Bellus Locus* the collection of notes covers a huge range of interest from local accounts of earthquakes and hurricanes to details of various notable Wills in the area. Copies of various Royal Charters, drawings of buildings in the town, lists of subscribers associated with the building of the new Bewdley Bridge and even an account of Cock fighting. All is written in his own hand and the text does take some careful reading to decipher, but it all shows how this once illiterate man came to easily put his thoughts on paper.



Jorden contributed to the debate over whether there are three distinct forms of lime tree in Britain, and his notes are quoted by Shropshire Botanist W. A. Leighton in the *Phytologist* Vol 1 dated 1841 describing clear differences in the foliage. George's background and upbringing comes out in articles such as the one in the *The Phytologist* Vol 2. Here in an article called *Economical Botany* he describes the use of White and Black Mustard *Sinapsis alba* and *S. nigra* which were used as a condiment and in medicines. Also in the same issue he writes about the superstitious uses of plants when he quotes some old remedies where he shows the old fashioned approach to medicine. He goes on to say that many of those plants which were considered good for food and medicine in days gone by, and were cultivated in gardens, still linger around dwellings as outcasts. George also says on one occasion in his diary that the price of imported tea is so great that he suggests some alternative herbal mixes which are just as good. Remembering his childhood he says in his diary "how delightful were those excursions I used to take, to gather those esculents and medicinal herbs for the village doctress, to relieve her suffering neighbours' ailments! Collecting those herbs first gave me a desire to study botany, which conferred on my after-years the greatest enjoyment".

Although George would appear to be living on a modest income as a servant he obviously managed to acquire enough money to pass on to the family of his brothers and sisters, and James Fryer had helped in this respect. In George's Will he mentions property including somewhere in Lax Lane, Bewdley to be passed to his relatives in the Farlow, Oreton area, so he obviously kept a close interest in his birthplace. One interesting location that crops up in George's records of where his family lived is somewhere called the Rotherham Factory. This was a water mill and cotton mill built in 1794 at a place called Rotherham



(SO662804) just east of Oreton on the River Rea. There must have been cottages connected with the site but there is little trace of the factory now.

Regarding the personality of George Jorden, we can see what he says in *The Phytologist* Vol 3 (1858-9) "in that the study of Natural History would render mankind less selfish as it demonstrates how every little creature has its place in the world and that if man was less selfish and more amiable, he would be happy".

A measure of the respect given to George by fellow botanists is shown in Edwin Lees's 'Botany of Worcestershire' where he analyses the contribution made by various people in the county. He says this "in connection with Bewdley and the Wyre Forest, George Jordan merits high commendation as an untired explorer and guide for many years, and still at the great age of 85 retaining much botanical zeal. While his strength allowed he was ever ready to lead the way to the purlieu of the forest, and as a fine nosed herbalist he was rarely at fault on his own ground. Having many times guided the club and its members to the time honoured but decrepid Sorb tree, which he regarded with almost filial love, its wanton destruction by ruffian hands was a source of much grief to him, and he gathered up with decent care the relics that were left of the limbs of the old veteran some of which he yet retains". After Jorden's death Lees wrote in an obituary "I only knew him as an acute, painstaking botanist, and as such he was acknowledged among the scientific men who sought the intricacies of the Forest of Wyre. He was simple and unobtrusive in his manners and ever ready to give his services in connection with his favourite pursuit."

When we think back to the early pioneers of natural history, George Jorden must be considered one of the very best authorities on the Wyre Forest area of his time and current members of the Wyre Forest Study Group can't help wish they could encounter George when out on one of their forays. They would share George's philosophy that the study of natural history makes mankind more amicable and less selfish and that a man that was amicable is a happy man.

There are many references to Jorden in the literature of the time. For those interested, consult the table below, and inform the author of any further known references.

The spelling of George's name Jordan and Jorden.

Both spellings are often encountered and to investigate this, original sources have been searched, some of them in his own handwriting. With the registration of births, deaths and public censuses it must be remembered that variations exist as in

Jordan /Jordan References	Vol.	Dates	Page	Notes
The Phytologist A Popular Botanical Miscellany	1	1844	147	Letter from Jordan re species of Tilia, also P169 a reply to Jordan's Tilia letter
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	1	1855-56	151	A Visit to Wyre Forest, Worcestershire. By T. W. Gissing July 1854 with Jordan (who finds <i>Spiranthes aestivalis</i>)
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	1	1855-56	281, 354	Botany of Wyre Forest and surrounding parts of the Country by George Jordan
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	2	1857-58	252	Sorb Tree of Wyre Forest by Jordan
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	2	1857-58	436, 478	Superstitious Uses Of Plants Jordan - tongue in cheek look; Jordan replies to letter about Mustard
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	2	1857-58	128, 656	Economical Botany-Jordan; WNC account of visit to Sorb tree with G Jordan-June 1858
The Phytologist A Popular Botanical Miscellany	3	1848	54	Edwin Lees, in paper on Brambles, relates how they went with Jordan for first time to Wyre in Summer of 1847
The Phytologist A Popular Botanical Miscellany	3	1848	76	Notes on Shropshire Rubus sp. by the Rev. W. A. Leighton P159 continued from P 76
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	3	1858-59	47-51	Three notes from Jordan re Mural plants, <i>Lathraea squamaria</i> on Filbert Tree & Splitting two British Thymes
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	3	1858-59	254	Letter from Jordan saying that <i>Doronicum Pardalianches</i> & <i>Digitalis purpurea</i> do flower at same time
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	3	1858-59	264, 286	A Descant on Creation. Observations on the Vicissitudes of our Climate; Reply letter re Jordan's Mural Plants
The Phytologist A Popular Botanical Miscellany	4	1851	1101	WNC meeting to the Sorb Tree referred to Jordan saying Bloody Cranesbill was only on Shropshire side of Dowles
The Phytologist A Popular Botanical Miscellany	4	1851	1142	Letter from Jordan describing difference between two Thymes and saying sheep can tell them apart-If Biologists can't!
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	4	1860	37, 191	Jordan's paper on Common Primrose, Cowslip & Oxlip; Answers to queries (<i>Prunella vulgaris</i> / <i>Gymnadenia</i> /Oak Gall)
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	5	1861	72	Jordan letter about the vitality of seed written in 1851
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	6	1862-63	236	Some Observations on Fairy Rings, and the Agarics that produce them. By George Jordan
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	6	1862-63	252	Death of the Wyre Forest old Sorb-tree. & Plague of Tortrix viridaria
The Phytologist A Botanical Journal	6	1862-63	540	Letter writer describes Jordan as a most admirable person
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	14	Lees announces Jordan has found Summer Ladies Tresses in Wyre
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	15	Sept 1854 Jordan led a meeting of WNC in to Wyre, Seckley & Arley
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	17	AGM 1855 announcement that Jordan had found <i>Spiranthes aestivalis</i> , summer lady's-tresses
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	46	In an after dinner speech in 1858 Lees mentions Jordan as having seen <i>Actinocarpus damasonium</i>
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	76	1862 Arley- Seckley Meeting. after Dinner Jordan produced remains of burnt Sorb tree
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	88	1864 Bewdley- Dowles meeting after which Jordan produced several botanical specimens
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	174	1871 Lees announces the death of Jordan after an Enville meeting
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	245	1877 Ref to Jordan having eaten Salted Viands in the winter a youth (probably meats)
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	1	1848-96	483	Jordan listed as the 25th member of the WNC, joining in 1855
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	2	1897-99	16	WNC worthies remember Jordan the 'Custos of Wyre'
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	4	1907-10	84	1854 another ref to Summer ladies tresses having been found by Jordan
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	4	1907-10	210-14	Jeffery's account of Jordan's <i>Bellus Locus</i>
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	4	1907-10	270-86	1910 Additions to The Botany of Worcs-Carlton Rea- Jordan's records
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	5-6	1911-17	90,92,93	1911 Jeffery's sob Tree account with ref to Jordan
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	7	1918-22	294-308	1921 Jeffery's Gleanings of George Jordan-A Bewdley Naturalist
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	8	1923-31	177	Jordan quoted as noticing earlier leafing of Oaks on Higher Ground
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	8	1923-31	261	Another reference to Jordan' Summer Lady's tresses
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	8	1923-31	262	Jordan - another reference to the splitting of the Thymes
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	9	1932-41	27	Thalictrum minus- Lesser Meadow Rue record by Jordan -remembered in 1933
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	9	1932-41	34	Another Reference to Jordan and the splitting of Thymes
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	10	1942-53	113	Alice Parker writes and surmises Jordan planted the <i>Withybed Sorbus domestica</i>
Trans of the Worcestershire Naturalists Club	10	1942-53	147	Jane Lees writes in 1948 re - a vase and goblets made from Jordan's Sorb Tree remains
Worcester Journal		1844, 45		George Jordan donates specimens to Worcester Museum 15 Aug 1844 & 11 Dec 1845
Worcester Journal		1851		George Jordan Lecture in Bewdley 07 Aug 1851
Pictures of Nature in the Silurian Region- E. Lees		1856		Jordan mentioned 16 times
Flora of Shropshire - W. A. Leighton		1861		55 References in Wyre and SE Shropshire
Handbook to the Severn Valley Railway-J. Randall		1863		Records from Messrs. Baugh, Jordin, and Maw
Transaction of Severn Valley Naturalists Field Club		1863		Notification that Jordan is leading a meeting to The Sorb Tree of Wyre
Kidderminster Library unpub-copy		1864		Jordan - Bound Collection of handwritten Notes incl The Flora <i>Bellus Locus</i> - area around Bewdley
Botany of Worcs - E Lees		1865		25 References to Jordan and his records
Bewdley Parish Magazine		1880		Obituary for George Jordan by Edwin Lees
The Midland Naturalist Vols XIII, XIV & XV		1890-92		Over 120 records attributable to Jordan
Botany of Worcestershire- Amphlett & Rea		1909		references to 61 plants including several first records for Worcs such as <i>Carex digitata</i> , <i>Spiranthes aestivalis</i>
Bewdley & Surroundings- I. L. Wedley		1914	62	Account of Jordan
Rare plants of Shropshire- lock ton & Whild		1995		37 Rare records from Jordan

most cases registrars and incumbents wrote down what they heard. In 1783 many people could not read or write and it wasn't compulsory to register births anyway. Having said that, it is almost certain that the generally accepted family name was Jordan. This is the Church registered birth name for George and for most of his family in the Stottesdon and Farlow area where they lived. The 1841 census had George down as Jordan but in the 1851 and 1871 censuses he was recorded as Jorden. If the references to George by his contemporaries are examined, there is again a mixture. Edwin Lees, who was a close friend, wrote of him as Jordan as did William Mathews, but later writers from the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club (WNC) like F.R. Jeffery used Jorden. Even the Phytologist, where Jordan submitted various papers and letters, has him with both spellings. The same Phytologist No 3 1858-9 had Jordan in his paper on Mural Plants and Jorden in an article about the Vicissitudes of our Climate on Organic Plants. Early botanists from Shropshire quoted him as Jorden (Leighton 1841) and that continued with later Botanic authors (Lockton & Whild -1995). Samples of plants submitted to the Worcester City Museum are signed in his own hand as Jordan such as the one for a sample of Rosebay Willowherb *Chamaenerion angustifolium* in 1840. Looking in the Transactions

of the WNC, there are 10 references to Jordan and 43 to Jorden. Interestingly nearly all the spellings of Jordan are early in his lifetime whereas all but one of the Jorden references are from later works by others writing in the transactions. In later years George may have wanted to be known as Jorden and indeed his notable work, the collection of his notes held in Kidderminster Library and containing the *Bellus Locus* are all in his hand and signed. The final piece of evidence is his will which is signed as Jorden and witnessed by others. Not only that, but all his family who are mentioned as benefactors in his will are spelled the same way. And so it appears that George was born a Jordan but for some reason eventually used Jorden, and in deference to his choice in later life, this article has retained that spelling unless reference works are being quoted as they were printed. Thinking of these references, it was the case during Jorden's lifetime that there were several notable Jordans submitting material to the journals and writing for the Phytologist, Claude Thomas Alexis Jordan a French botanist and taxonomist (1814-97) and more locally, R. C. R. Jordan (1825-90) – a Birmingham doctor who collected plants locally and in Devon. Perhaps George wanted to try and distance himself from them by adopting the slightly different spelling.