

Building a new church of flowers

Helena Attlee rejoices in the story of a late-Victorian polymath whose studies of flora, fauna and archaeology in the Alpes Maritimes are still of great value today

Biography/natural history
 Marvels: The Life of Clarence Bicknell
 Valerie Lester (Matador, £25)

CLARENCE BICKNELL was an Anglican clergy-man who fell out of love with the Church and moved to Bordighera on the Italian Riviera in 1879. This book by his great-grand-niece paints an endearing picture of her uncle, who carved out such an important place for himself in botanical studies and archaeological fieldwork that 36 museums and universities in 12 countries have preserved his watercolours of wildflowers, the rubbings he took from Bronze Age rock engravings, his paintings of landscapes in Liguria and the Alps and his letters, diaries, sketchbooks, notebooks and photographs.

Valerie Lester has drawn on these public and private collections and on the archives of the Bicknell museum in Bordighera to produce a book rich in illustrations of every kind.

Bicknell moved to Bordighera when he was 38. He avoided the snobbish conversations and stuffy tea parties of other English residents by walking great distances along the seashore or climbing to extraordinary heights in the Alpes Maritimes.

By 1866, he had made so many meticulous studies of the wild-flowers he found on these walks,

and so many rubbings from rock carvings in the Vallée des Merveilles, that he could no longer accommodate them all in his own villa.



One of Clarence Bicknell's thousands of detailed flower studies

He also needed more space for his herbarium, his library and the local rocks, minerals, stuffed birds and Roman and prehistoric artefacts he had collected, conserved and catalogued over the years, together with the glass cases full of butterflies he had bought in London. He decided to resolve all these problems by building the Museo Bicknell.

By this means, he was also able to open his collections to the public, a thoroughly democratic attitude that

also saw him offering the space to everyone in town as a venue for charitable fundraisers, such as lectures, concerts, plays and dances. Museo Bicknell is still open today, a symbol of its founder's enduring influence on the cultural life of the Riviera.



Bicknell explored every inch of the Riviera, sketching all the way

The author has a gift for setting her uncle's activities in a wider context, so that her book is also a fascinating vignette of intellectual fashions during the late-Victorian Enlightenment. She explains, for example, that Bicknell was not alone in his passion for botany, that botanising was seen by the Victorians as 'a genteel pastime for women and children because flowers did not kill and copulate to the extent that animals often embarrassingly did'.

Consequently, the foothills of the Alps saw such an invasion of English visitors that local landowners were driven to put up notices on their gates reading 'Private' and 'Do not pick the flowers'.

The author follows the slow burn of Bicknell's disappointment with Anglicanism and the blossoming of

his vision for a universal church in which 'any man lay or clerical might be invited to speak out what God had taught him'. It comes as no surprise that Bicknell was also a passionate supporter of Esperanto, the universal language he believed could bring lasting peace between nations.

This biography sits alongside a short film produced by the author's cousin Marcus Bicknell, which is available to view online in several languages, including Esperanto. It also coincides with numerous events and exhibitions organised all over Europe to mark the

centenary of Bicknell's death in July 1918. Together, they are a timely reminder of the work and the thoroughly Christian ideals of this genial Englishman, with his vision for European unity and cooperation. Some of Clarence Bicknell's watercolours are included in 'Floral Fantasies', an exhibition at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, until September 9.

www.countrylife.co.uk

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