

Bicknell, Clarence (1842–1918), archaeologist and botanist

Oxford Dictionary of
National Biography

Oxford Biography Index Number 101041049

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101041049/Clarence-Bicknell>

Primary authority: Oxford DNB

Bicknell, Clarence (1842–1918), archaeologist and botanist, the youngest son of Elhanan Bicknell (1788–1861), financier and art patron, and his third wife, Lucinda Sarah (1801–1850), sister of Hablot Knight Browne, was born at Herne Hill, Surrey, on 27 October 1842. Herman Bicknell, orientalist and traveller, was his brother. Clarence was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, in January 1861, graduated BA in 1865, and proceeded MA in 1873. Despite the Wesleyan and Unitarian influences in his family background and its liberal and reformist independence of thought, which characterized his own attitudes later, he chose a conventional career in the Church of England: he was ordained deacon in 1866, priest in 1868, and held curacies at St Paul's, Newington, Surrey (1866–72), and Stoke upon Tern, Shropshire (1875–81).

For health reasons Bicknell adopted the practice of wintering abroad. In 1878 he visited Bordighera on the Italian 'coast of flowers', a congenial setting for a man with wide natural history interests and a particular expertise in botany. Here in the following years he ministered to the religious needs of the large British community, made the Villa Rosa his home, and created the Bicknell Museum. The museum had a dual purpose: to house his books and naturalist collections, but also to provide a meeting-place in which the local community could pursue their cultural and intellectual interests. He included a stage for concerts, and the two large pots designed to receive umbrellas bear inscriptions in Esperanto, testifying to his enthusiasm for an international language. Esperanto appears again on a plaque in Bordighera's English library, built by Bicknell largely at his own expense. A typically Victorian innovator, he was also a vegetarian, an enemy of the water-closet in the cause of organic husbandry, and a spartan devotee of personal ablutions in icy mountain torrents.

In 1885 Bicknell published *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera and Adjoining Mountains*, illustrated with eighty-two of his own paintings, and in September of that year he made what was to be a momentous journey to the Val des Merveilles, a series of glacial lakes in the maritime Alps at about 2200 yards along the western flank of Mount Bego. Six years earlier he had made an abortive attempt to inspect the rock engravings there, on which there was little reliable information, but unseasonably late snow had thwarted him. At this second attempt he sketched about fifty of the mysterious prehistoric designs. His curiosity was aroused, but his principal occupation continued to be his botanical work, culminating in 1896 with the publication of his *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*.

In the following summer Bicknell rented a house at Casterino on the gentler slopes of Mount Bego, where he could combine his studies of alpine plants and the rock engravings. In September he sent a piece of incised rock to the British Museum with a report of his discoveries. Increasingly his summers were spent in amassing his collection of drawings, rubbings, and photographs, on which he based his first papers in Italian scientific journals. In 1902 he published in Bordighera *The Prehistoric Rock Engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*, and a further account of his explorations followed in 1903. The unwelcome news that year that his rented base in Casterino had been sold, and that no other was available, was met with his decision to build a place of his own. All materials had to be transported by mules from Tende. Work began in 1905 and a year later Casa Fontanalba was ready for Bicknell's annual visit in June to 'my beloved mountain cottage and the free life I so enjoy' (Bicknell to Baroness Helene von Taube, 29 Sept 1913, NHM, 92 BIC).

The pattern of Bicknell's life was now set. Although he visited Ceylon in 1907 to see the island's plants and butterflies, and Britain in 1910 and 1913, his increasing preoccupation was

with the innumerable representations of a horned creature or stag-headed god and of typical Bronze Age daggers, and with the strange patterns defying interpretation, which cover so many rock surfaces at 2000–2500 metres surrounding the great peak of Bego. With his assistant Luigi Pollini, Bicknell gradually built up his astonishing documentation of over 11,000 petroglyphs which form the basis of his Guide to the Prehistoric Rock-Engravings in the Maritime Alps, published in 1913. By his labours over twelve summers he had focused international attention on one of the major monuments of European archaeology, and he continued to add to the record. On 18 August 1913 he wrote to Baroness von Taube:

‘Luigi and I have been camping out for 2 nights, 4 hours away, and again exploring the rock figures ... I cannot do quite as much as ten years ago ... but I intend to fight on as long as possible, and so help those that come after.’ (Bicknell to Baroness Helene von Taube, NHM, 92 BIC)

Bicknell died unmarried at Casa Fontanalba on 17 July 1918 and was buried in the cemetery at Tende. Fifty years later the publication of French and Italian translations of his Guide was undertaken by the International Institute of Ligurian Studies, which had inherited Bicknell's museum and its traditions, in this area of historically alternating national sovereignty. To mark the occasion France and Italy combined to honour Bicknell's memory with laudatory plaques on his chalet at Fontanalba and on the rock face at Les Mesches, the gateway to Mount Bego. Nor has his distinction as a botanist been forgotten: a subspecies of the giant knapweed, which is a speciality of the alpine area, was officially named in 1973 *Leuzea rhapontica bicknellii*.

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Desmond Hawkins, ‘Bicknell, Clarence (1842–1918)’, first published 2004; online edn, May 2010, 943 words

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Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/41049>