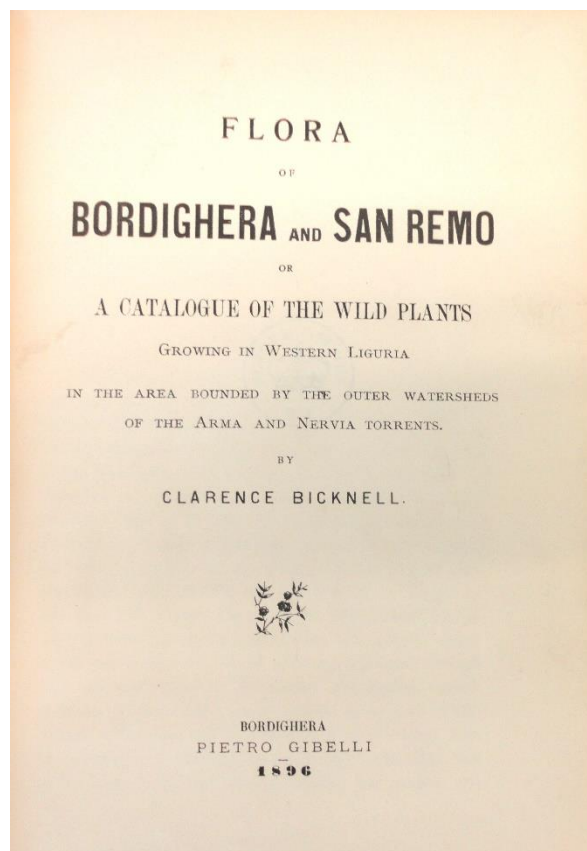
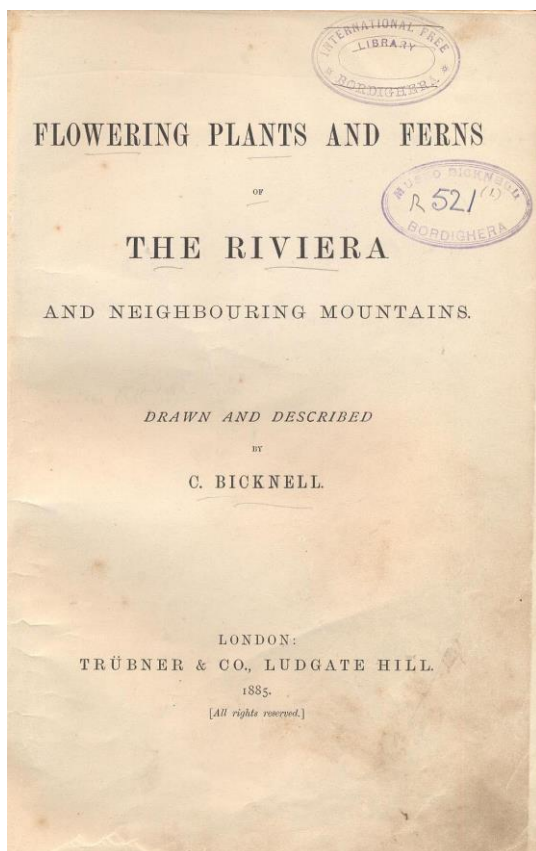


Clarence Bicknell The Botanist

Clarence Bicknell's major work was the exploration and recording of the prehistoric rock engravings in the high valleys of Fontanalba and Meraviglie. But before he discovered archaeology, his passion was botany, and it was his botanical excursions that brought him to the mountains.

We do not know when he first developed an interest in botany, but in his affluent Victorian family the naming of flowers would have been part of a child's basic education. Within five years of arriving in Bordighera in 1878 Clarence had painted 1100 water-colours of the local flora. This was the result of excursions in the surrounding countryside, when he collected flowers, took them home to dry as specimens for his herbarium, and painted them in water-colours. Clarence also explored the nearby mountains: already in 1881, he made an excursion with friends from San Dalmazzo to the high valley of the Meraviglie, and in 1888 he began regular visits to the Valle di Pesio, where San Bartolomeo was his base for botanical excursions. Many other expatriates on the Riviera were interested in flowers: the well-known botanical garden at Mortola was created by Sir Thomas Hanbury.

Botanical Publications



In 1885 Clarence published a selection of his paintings in the book *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera*, splendidly illustrated with 82 coloured plates and accompanying notes on 280 species. He explained in the Preface that it was inspired by the British botanist J.T. Moggridge who, in his *Flora of neighbouring Menton*, published in London in 1864, encouraged others to follow his example in publishing illustrations of the local flora. Clarence commented regretfully that many of the plants of the coast and adjacent mountains

‘are now to be found no more, and many others are becoming extremely scarce, owing to the ravages committed by horticulturalists’ agents and winter visitors. Every autumn, too, a new road or villa or vineyard has caused the disappearance of some favourite old friends’.



Aristolochia, an insect-catcher. Plate 52 of *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*

Clarence’s *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*, published in 1896, was a work of reference – a list of species found his excursions – with no illustrations. In the Preface he wrote ‘There is no part of this district which may not be visited by a good walker, with the assistance of a carriage, within a day’s excursion, and by an early start one may be among the larches, the gentians, and the *Edelweiss* on a summer morning, and in the evening gather *Oleander* and *Pancreatium* near the sea. It would be difficult to find another region of equal size with a richer or more varied flora, and after some ten years botanical expeditions I have collected over 1700 species of vascular plants’. He added wistfully ‘I think it well, with increasing years and decreasing walking powers, no longer to delay the publication of a catalogue of our plants’.

Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera was published by Trübner & Co, a London firm specialising in books on travel, geography, and oriental literature. Founded in 1851 by Nicholas Trübner from Heidelberg, it later merged with Kegan Paul, and is now part of Routledge. Clarence may well have chosen Trübner because of the expertise needed for the colour lithographs, produced by West, Newman & Co.

The *Journal of Botany (British and Foreign)* of London was critical of aspects of the book, commenting that it was ‘hardly on a level scientifically with Mr Moggridge’s book’ and ‘the colour printing is fairly good, but could be better’. But it continued ‘This handsome book... is distinctly in advance of most of its class... The book is an expensive one; but there must be many who will gladly add it to their libraries... The modest tone in which Mr Bicknell writes, as well as the evidence of care taken in both drawing and description, induce us to wish well to this handsome volume’.

A reviewer in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* of London commented that ‘the figures are accurate as far as they go, but they are rather the rough memoranda which the collector makes for his own use, than the detailed drawings required by the botanist’. ‘Nevertheless, from the point of view of the botanist and gardener Mr Bicknell is a benefactor of his kind, for a series of generally faithful drawings, whatever their technical defects, cannot fail to be of great service... There is then ample room for Mr Bicknell’s work, and we trust we may speedily welcome a second series’. Clarence had written in the Preface that he was ‘hoping to prepare a second series, should this first one be found to meet a want’, but he did not publish another work of the same kind.

Flora of Bordighera and San Remo was published by Pietro Gibelli of Bordighera, and was not reviewed in British journals. Gibelli was the publisher of a range of books in Italian, French and English, as well as postcards and maps; later, he published two of Clarence’s books on rock engravings, and two of his works in Esperanto.

Bruckmann’s *Illustrated Guide to Bordighera* (2nd edition, 1902, published Munich in English and Italian) includes a chapter by Clarence on ‘The Flora of Bordighera’ which begins ‘The flora of this district is very rich, and comprises about 1750 species of vascular plants, but as this work is intended for winter visitors and amateur botanists, we propose to give only some idea of the most interesting plants which may be gathered between the beginning of October and the end of June’. The book has two pages by Clarence listing flowers and their locations, and adds ‘the writer’s catalogue of the *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo* gives an exhaustive list of the local plants’.

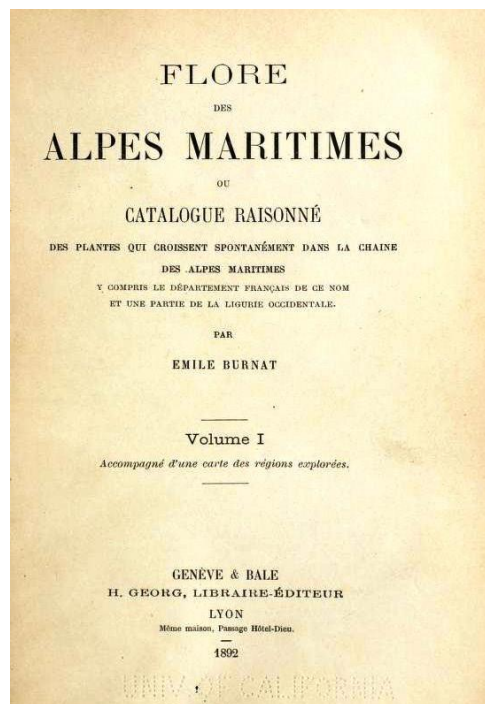
Botanical Friends

In his book of 1896 Clarence wrote ‘I greatly wish that more of our winter visitors, both at Bordighera and San Remo, would send me the plants they find, however common... I shall always be grateful for specimens, as well as corrections of any of the numerous errors into which I have probably fallen, in this extreme corner of Italy with only a small botanical library and far from Herbaria and from fellow-workers’.

Clarence had, nevertheless, many botanical acquaintances. In the Preface of his 1885 book he thanked particularly his friend Francesco Panizzi of San Remo, and other botanists at Pisa, Genoa, Turin, Geneva, and the President of the Linnaean Society in London. Francesco Panizzi, who had a pharmaceutical establishment in San Remo, was a proficient botanist who discovered new species: *Narcissus panizzianus* is named after him. In his 1896 book Clarence lamented that ‘the Herbarium of my friend the late Cav. F. Panizzi, which his son has kindly placed at my disposal, has been sadly neglected, and vast numbers of plants have been destroyed by insects beyond all possibility of recognition’.

In 1883 the botanical expertise of Panizzi and Bicknell was mentioned in the book *San Remo climatically and medically considered* by Arthur Hill Hassall, to which Clarence contributed a 'classified list of most of the principal Flowering Plants'. Hill was a British physician specialising in tuberculosis, who had founded a sanatorium at Ventnor in the Isle of Wight, and settled in San Remo in 1878.

Bicknell's most significant botanical friendship was with the Swiss botanist Emile Burnat (1828-1920), who was described by Reginald Farrer in 1911 as 'the greatest authority on the flora of the Maritime Alps'. In the Introduction to *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo* Clarence thanked 'the many eminent botanists who have assisted me in the determination of species, for which my knowledge was insufficient, and among these chiefly Monsieur Emile Burnat, whose exhaustive work on the flora of the Maritime Alps is now in course of publication'. Burnat's monumental *Flore des Alpes Maritimes* was published in Geneva in six volumes from 1892 to 1917, with a posthumous volume in 1931.



In Volume 1 Burnat thanked « *mon ami M. Cl. Bicknell (auteur de Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera) établi à Bordighera, lequel m'a depuis six années communiqué de nombreuses plantes de diverses parties des Alpes maritimes, dont plusieurs nouvelles pour ma Flore* » ('my friend Clarence Bicknell of Bordighera, who in the past six years has sent me many plants from various parts of the Maritime Alps, including several species new to my Flora').

In Volume 4 Burnat wrote « *Notre excellent ami, M. Cl. Bicknell, n'a cessé de nous donner un bienveillant concours en nous envoyant, avec ses meilleures récoltes, de nombreuses observations* » ('our good friend Clarence Bicknell has continued his kind assistance by sending numerous observations, together with the best of the specimens that he collects'). Burnat's *Flore* includes hundreds of citations of Bicknell, who provided more than a thousand of the specimens listed in the catalogue of Burnat's Herbarium in Geneva.

A younger friend was Dr Fritz Mader of Nice (son of the priest of its Lutheran church) and of Tenda, from where explored the mountains in the summer. He was not only a botanist (he

corresponded with Burnat) but also an alpinist and geologist. His many publications included *Excursions in the Maritime Alps* (1896, in Italian), *Guide to the Riviera* (1900, in German), and a survey of gardens in the Maritime Alps (1912, in French). Another German friend was Dr. Alwin Berger, curator of Sir Thomas Hanbury's garden at La Mortola'.

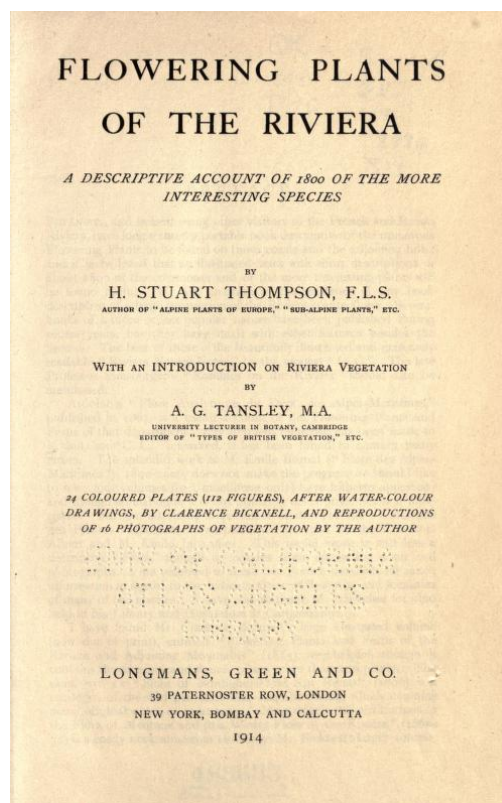
Botanists at Casa Fontanalba

From 1906 onwards Clarence received visits from amateur and professional botanists at his summer home in the mountains, Casa Fontanalba, where their names were recorded in the Visitors Book.

Fritz Mader's name appears in the Visitors Book in 1906, 1909, and in 1911, when he was accompanied by his sister Marie.

In 1909 Emile Burnat appears in the Visitors Book together with his son Jean and his associates Francois Cavillier, John Briquet and Emile Abrezol - a veritable galaxy of botanical talent. Briquet was head of the Botanical Garden in Geneva, where Cavillier and Abrezol were assistants.

The British botanist Harold Stuart Thompson stayed at Casa Fontanalba in 1907, and later published *Flowering Plants of the Riviera* (1914) in which the coloured plates were reproductions of water-colours by Clarence. He commented in the Preface that he had 'found Mr Clarence Bicknell's large illustrated volume (now out of print) entitled *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera* very helpful... and the same writer's *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*... contains many original notes of great value'.





Illustrations by Clarence Bicknell in Thompson's *Flowering Plants of the Riviera*

Reviewing Thompson's book, the *Journal of Botany (British and Foreign)* of London commented that readers 'will be aided in their work by the coloured figures, much reduced from the admirable drawings of Mr Clarence Bicknell. Those who know Mr Bicknell's volume published in 1885 will share with us the hope that more of his drawings may be reproduced in a style worthy of the originals'.

At Casa Fontanalba in 1910 Clarence received the British plant collectors Reginald Farrer and Clarence Elliott. Farrer reported this encounter in his book *Among The Hills* (1911) and later in *The English Rock-Garden* (1919) he recommended a visit to the valley occupied by 'a famous English botanist, one Mr Bicknell, who has there a house and spends long summers, in the course of which he asks nothing better than to show the treasures of his hills to all such fellow-collectors as desire to see them'.

The Swiss botanist Henry Correvon (author of *Atlas de la Flore Alpine*) visited Casa Fontalba in 1914.

Alpine Gardens

Clarence created a small garden at Casa Fontanalba with local flower species, which he recorded in an album with water-colour paintings and botanical notes. In the Visitors Book for Casa Fontanalba he included a flower-painting for each special guest. Botanical themes figure in the mural decoration that Clarence executed for the interior of the house, and for his friend Margaret Berry he designed a botanical version of the popular card game 'Happy Families', with cards depicting 16 flower-families.

Clarence visited regularly the alpine valley of Valle di Pesio, north-east of Tende, which was Emile Burnat's base for several botanical campaigns. Italy's *Parco naturale del Marguareis* has a nature reserve on the slopes of Monte Marguareis that commemorates the work of both men.



Stazione Botanica Alpina E. Burnat / C. Bicknell

The nature reserve protects rare and threatened habitats and high-mountain plants endemic to the region. It is reached from Pian delle Gore at 1000 metres by a path that goes up through the Sestrera valley to the botanical reserve at 1980 metres. Emile Burnat camped in the Sestrera valley, and from the nearby Serpentera valley Clarence Bicknell made a sketch of Monte Marguareis on September 2nd 1888.



Monte Marguareis from Gias di Serpentera, Clarence Bicknell, 2 September 1888

From Botany to Archaeology

It was botany that brought Clarence to the high valleys and the rock figures. In his Preface to *The prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (1902, pages 5-6) he wrote 'I am only an amateur botanist, and have gone up into these neighbouring mountains in my summer holidays in order to study their Flora; but the fascination of the rocks has made me neglect my special hobby; and I have spent the greater part of my time in making drawings and taking notes of the rock figures'.

In *A guide to the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps* (1913, page 26) Clarence explained that after his visits to the valley of the Meraviglie in 1881 and 1885 ‘in 1897 I heard that a house in Val Casterino... was to be let and I took it for the summer, partly with the intention of botanising, but partly with that of seeing more of the rock figures’. Later he built his summer home, Casa Fontanalba, in Val Casterino.

He wrote (page 11 of *A guide to the prehistoric rock engravings in the Italian Maritime Alps*) ‘there are a good many plants in the neighbourhood peculiar to the Maritime Alps, but the flora is not so rich as it would be if there were more calcareous rock’. After listing a number of species, he continued “*Edelweiss*, the much overrated flower, called in Italy *Stella d’Italia*, to gather which so many lose their lives in Switzerland and elsewhere, is the commonest of common plants on the limestone. The glory of the Maritime Alps *Saxifraga florulenta* is to be found on vertical cliffs in Val Fontanalba and in Val Valmasca, the latter being the habitat farthest east at present known”.

Known in English as ‘*The Ancient King*’, the rare and spectacular *Saxifraga florulenta* grows only in inaccessible places in the Maritime Alps. Once in its life it sends up a big flower-spike, and then dies.



Saxifraga florulenta, watercolour by Clarence Bicknell
Reproduced by courtesy of the University of Genova

Clarence’s experience as a botanist contributed to his work as an archaeologist. His predecessors in the study of the rock engravings had developed speculative theories about their origin, giving priority to historical interpretation rather than methodical description. But

botanists do not interpret flowers, they describe them. It was Clarence's meticulous drawing, photographing, recording, listing, classifying, and publishing of the rock-figures that helped him to bring them out of the obscurity of antiquarian speculation into the light of scientific investigation and analysis. Although Clarence devoted many years to botany, it was his work on rock art that brought him fame. The field of botany was already well cultivated; in the field of prehistory, he was able to pioneer new techniques and disseminate new information.

Clarence Bicknell's Botanical Legacy

Clarence's legacy to botanical science includes his books, his paintings, his herbarium, and his contribution to knowledge of the flora of his region.

His book *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera* contains outstandingly beautiful images. His book *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo* is a comprehensive catalogue of local species, and was innovative in including their names in the local dialect. He made more than 3000 flower paintings, of which many are preserved in the Hanbury Institute at the University of Genova. The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge has more than 400 of his designs, sketches, and drawings of flowers. The University of Genova has 247 packets of his dried specimens, while the Museo Bicknell has 48 packets with a total of 11,216 folio sheets.

Clarence's role in recording the flora of the Maritime Alps was significant. He identified many new sites of rare or endemic plants, he added 73 species to those known to grow in Liguria, and he was the first to identify an Italian site of the species *Sempervivum calcareum*. He is commemorated by several plants named after him:

- *Euphrasia bicknellii* Wettstein
- *Rhaponticum helenifolium* subsp. *bicknellii* (Briq.) Greuter
- *Dorycnium bicknellianum* Beiger et Dinter
- *Hieracium bicknellianum* Belli et Arvet-Touvet
- *Pimpinella bicknellii* Briquet (discovered by Bicknell on Majorca in 1897)

On Clarence's death in 1918 respectful obituaries were published in several botanical journals. For example, J. Walter White of *The Botanical Society and Exchange Club of the British Isles* wrote (Report for 1918, page 352):

"The death of Clarence Bicknell at the age of 76 has removed one of the best known botanists of Southern Europe, a man of remarkable personal charm and gifted with scientific and artistic ability of the highest order. During his forty years residence at Bordighera he had systematically explored the Mediterranean region, publishing from time to time volumes on the flora of Bordighera and San Remo, and on the flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera and neighbouring mountains. These and likewise another book describing prehistoric rock-inscriptions found in the Italian Alpes-Maritimes are illustrated by hundreds of beautiful drawings. At his delightful summer residence high up in the Val Casterino di Tenda, Bicknell hospitably entertained botanist friends of all nationalities, and there he died.

Graham Avery
Vice-President of the Clarence Bicknell Association

August 2024
(revised version of text posted in April 2013)

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[Clarence Bicknell and *Iridomyrmex bicknelli*](#)

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[The Naming of Cima Bicknell and other Summits *](#)

* Link to be added by Marcus