

## The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell – and some remaining mystery

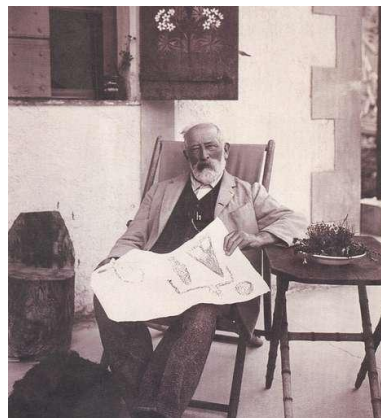
An opinion piece by Marcus Bicknell

28 April 2025

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*Note: the positive aspects of this paper were repeated in my article in Riviera Buzz at <https://riviera-buzz.com/features/local-buzz/item/clarence-bicknell-the-victorian-polymath-of-the-riviera.html>. This version permits me to expose the frustrations involved in working on Clarence's promotion.*

For many of us on the Riviera and in Liguria, the northwest part of Italy, Clarence Bicknell is worshipped as a marvel. His website describes him as The Victorian Polymath with a huge output of extraordinary botanical drawings (many with Victorian humour and whimsy to say nothing of the arts and crafts elements), rock engraving copies, pressed flowers, sketchbooks, and paintings. The Museo Bicknell in Bordighera, which he built in 1888, is a hidden gem evocative of a bygone era but in so many ways relevant today. The Casa Fontanalba ([image right](#)) which he built in 1906 at Casterino 1,550 metres up in the Alps, is a living museum of arts-and-crafts-style frescoes of plants and Esperanto sayings, not open to the public.



For his great-grand-nephew, your humble writer here present, he can be a mystery, and sometimes even maddening. Since 1988 when I first took a family trip up to Tende, Casterino and the Valley des Merveilles in the Mercantour mountains behind Nice, I have accepted willingly the mantle of Clarence's prime promotion agent. My uncle Peter bequeathed to me



the family's collection of some of his precious vellum-bound illustrated albums and a mass of sketch-book and files, those that did not end up in the University of Genoa or at the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge ([a sample image, left](#)). When I retired from full-time work in 2013, I and some other Clarence faithfuls created the Clarence Bicknell Association and the website [www.clarencbicknell.com](http://www.clarencbicknell.com) with the purpose of spreading his reputation to Britain, America and the rest of the world. I admit in private that it's been a difficult task; don't mention this to anyone. It is extremely rewarding working on his case in Bordighera, Genoa, Nice and up in the mountains, but I, despite having spent a lifetime's career in promotion and marketing, find my message fall on deaf ears in London. I am still waiting for the BBC, the culture channel Arte or the RAI to tell us they want to do a two-hour documentary on Clarence, his life and his works. The call doesn't come.

I attribute much of this to the fact that Clarence lived in Bordighera and was a member neither of the Royal Botanical Society nor the Royal Horticultural Society. What was he thinking? He would have been welcomed in the burgeoning scientific salons of London. He didn't think they were important. His works have always remained in private hands, owners who have not wanted to relinquish them, so very rarely have his works come up at auction. Unlike the



collection of his father Elhanan Bicknell, the great Turner collector of the early 19th century, Clarence's works have not come up at Christie's and Sotheby's. Unlike William Morris, John Ruskin, Walter Crane, Voysey and de Morgan, Clarence Bicknell has not struck a chord with the mass of culture vultures of Britain and the rest of the world.

Clarence's website has published close to 200 research papers on his works, his network of like-minded botanists and on a wide range of subjects from hymns in Esperanto, to the British royal families in Liguria and the gardening experts working for Thomas Hanbury in his renowned gardens tumbling into the sea on the French Italian border. The publication of the names of the people in his visitors' book is on the Internet and so from time to time a researcher into one of Clarence's network of scientists finds out about the link and is able to find out more from us and contribute further to the mine of knowledge.

It is with a sense of joy that I return in late April from a week's visit to Clarence's homeland. I gave talks in Genoa, in Bordighera (one to an English speaking audience and one to Italians) and in Nice. The enthusiasm of those that did not know about him, or only vaguely, is boundless. The desire both to know more and to contribute from those who do know about Clarence is both heart-warming and academically productive. At the Friends of the Riviera apero, organised by Narda Besems, Giuliano Gaia, who had purchased six of the prints of the arts-and-crafts framed watercolours of Alpine flowers, regaled the group with such enthusiasm that my job – a talk about Clarence's art - was made particularly easy. Thank you. A day later in Nice, in the library underneath the English church, Judit Kiraly had organised a similar talk; a small number of people but the space packed out, many of the audience there keen to see more of Clarence's Alpine flower watercolours. Jean-Félix Gandioli came and contributed; he is writer, teacher, professor of ecological botany, Attaché Scientifique at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Nice and promoter with me a few years ago of an exhibition there of *Les Botanistes au Sommet* in which Clarence was featured as one of the six botanists who went up into the high mountains of the southern Alps at the turn of the century. Christine Harvey accepted a gift of some of Clarence's Alpine flower prints to frame them to sell them in favour of church funds.



The highlight of my little trip was certainly the conference of 26 April 2025 organised by Dssa. Daniela Gandolfi, director of the International Institute of Ligurian Studies, the owner of the Museo Bicknell in Bordighera ([image left](#)). I was able to introduce the background to Clarence's extraordinary Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book; anybody who visited his mountain house between 1906 and his death in 1918 signed the book, so it is a who's-who of archaeologists, botanists, mineralogists,



Esperantists and other scientists. It is also a miraculous display of Clarence's large-scale watercolours of alpine flowers in arts-and-crafts ornamented borders. Then two other speakers filled in the gaps.



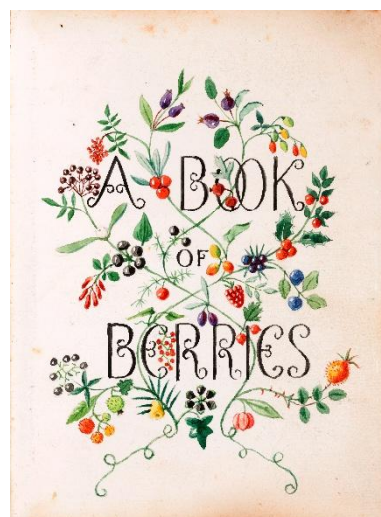
Claudio Littardi, a botanist also with the IISL, went into the detail of Clarence's watercolours, the twelve species that went on sale at the museum on the day. Claudio showed how Bicknell in each case paid attention to the aspects of the plant and flower which defined its species; behind the charm and colour of the petals, leaves, stems and arts and crafts borders lies disciplined knowledge of the Linnaean classification system which defines Genus and species; immensely decorative but at the same time academically correct.

Maria Pia Luly Jones, a noted botanical watercolourist who lived for a long time in Bordighera and is passionate about Clarence, demonstrated some of the techniques that Clarence must have used when painting; how to draw straight lines with a brush, how to make the stroke from the

bottom to the top to get even paint thickness, how to use a fine brush of only four hairs for the finest of detail and how to mix yellow. At moments when Maria Pia evoked in a voice which faltered for a second, Clarence was there with us in the room and a hundred fascinated faces. Others felt it too. Tim Leach, Tende resident and video blogger [www.youtube.com/@TiminTende](http://www.youtube.com/@TiminTende), wrote to me the same day "what an interesting and enjoyable event it was. It made me smile to imagine what Clarence might have thought, if he could have seen his great-grand-nephew and so many other people sitting in his museum in the year 2025, all coming together to celebrate his work! What a legacy!"

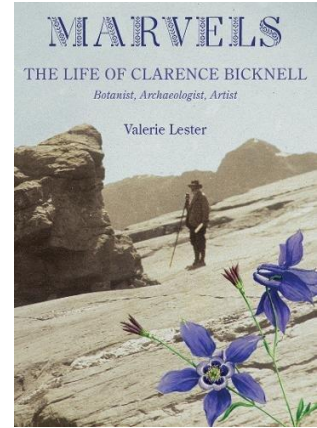
Many aspects of our culture, from hobbies to music, ancient history to great rock bands, are not just enjoyable for each of us but fundamentally important. In working on Clarence's *patrimoine*, I feel certain that there is long-term value to the human race in protecting and promoting our cultural heritage, both the bricks-and-mortar of our historic sites and artistic creations but also our intangible cultural heritage, the memories we can't touch but which we treasure so much.

Maybe if there was no mystery about Clarence, or if he were famous worldwide then he would not have so much value to those who do know about him. Yes, but that's a bit selfish, isn't it? I'm reminded of the decades I spent promoting new talent mostly in rock music, often underground acts like Genesis, then Supertramp and The Police. Many of those I worked on never made it and of course it was frustrating; they might have been musically brilliant but the radio DJs never played it, or the concerts didn't sell well or the band split up. When I'm working on promoting Clarence through talks, research, publications and social media the intensity of the work (the love) is very much like what is needed to break a new artist in the music



scene. There is a core of people who are absolutely devoted and then that maddening mass who are difficult to get to.

Valerie Lester's 2018 biography of Clarence Bicknell is called *MARVELS*; everything he touched was a marvel. Every time a new group of people acclaim his talents – or even just one person - my frustration at the mystery of the man and his elusive reputation tends to fade away. But I am still waiting for that phone call from a major TV company.



The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell: the film. On the home page of [www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com)

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