

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918)

Exhibition in The Guildhall London in 2024

A Victorian Polymath in the Maritime Alps: A Passion for Wild Flowers

Initial proposal of March 2023 for sponsors and stakeholders

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) was a man of letters, an artist, author, traveller, botanist, archaeologist, pastor, humanist and Esperantist. Born in Herne Hill near London, Clarence was the 13th child of Elhanan Bicknell, whale oil magnate and art patron. From 1879 he lived in Bordighera on the Ligurian Coast of Northwest Italy; he died at his summer home nearby in Casterino in the high mountains of the Franco-Italian border on 17th July 1918. Until recently, he was better known for his discovery and recording of 12,000 prehistoric rock engravings in the Mercantour mountains. His role features in the Musée de Merveilles on the prehistory of the area, and in the museum that he created in Bordighera, the Museo Bicknell. However, his botanical work and Arts-and-Crafts style are only now being recognised; his art is in private or university collections so there is not a market for his art and his is not a well-known name outside Italy. This exhibition acknowledges the talents of this relatively-unknown man.

- **Vellum-bound Albums.** Clarence filled twelve these albums with wild flowers (botanical, some in his Arts-and-Crafts style, symmetrical patterns and Victorian whimsy) as gifts for family and friends. Some original albums from the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge University), the Museo Bicknell, the University of Genoa and the Bicknell family collection would be displayed (one opening of each book under glass, each 80x50cms open).
- **Wall-mounted enlarged re-productions** of some of Clarence's works of arts, including illustrated pages from each album (20 to 30 images A1).
- **4 or more touch screen TV monitors**, near to these originals, show selected pages from Clarence's **albums** and more of his art, enabling the visitor to browse through the pages.
- **20 original pictures**, framed works of art such as landscapes and sketches.
- **Continuous projection of The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell**, the 18-minute film by Rémy Masségla; either **projected onto a wall or screen with** English audio or on **touch screen TV monitors**, the viewer having the choice of listening in English, Italian, French or Esperanto.
- **Continuous projection of art** and other Clarence images onto walls including the symmetrical or kaleidoscopic artworks (stills and video, commented if suitable).
- **20 to 30 wall-mounted information boards** in English, French and Italian; Clarence's life, Bordighera and its international community, the prehistoric rock engravings, the Arts and Crafts influence, illustrated as required (A1 size) See Annex 4 for boards done for previous exhibitions.
- **Esperanto Corner.** Displays on Esperanto and Clarence's interest in the universal language, photos of conferences, pages from *The Book of Guests in Esperanto* on touch screen, video of Professor Humphrey Tonkin of University of Hartford USA, Esperanto specialist, reading either from the Book of Guests and/or poems written by Clarence.

Guildhall
Art Gallery.



COMUNE DI GENOVA

The
Fitzwilliam
Museum
CAMBRIDGE



Università
di Genova



MUSEO
Clarence BICKNELL



The material needs a minimum of 20 metres (linear) wall space but looks better in about 60 metres. The dates of the London 2024 exhibition are under discussion with the Guildhall Gallery, for which c. £95,000 underwriting is required (detailed budget available). Thanks to the involvement of the City of London the Gallery will not levy its normal charge for the space. Costs are further controlled as much of Bicknell's works are already framed and available. The exhibition will subsequently be shown in suitable venues in Italy (including Genoa) and the UK (including Cambridge) and we are seeking the cooperation of cultural institutions in both countries. Discussions are open with the institutions shown at the base of the first page and the involvement of other stake holders is invited.

The Themes of the Exhibition

Although Clarence Bicknell made his name as an archaeologist (13,000 rock engravings copied and catalogued) and a botanist (seminal book on flowers of the Riviera), his passion lay in wild flowers, and the ideas they stimulated. Each year **Margaret Berry**, wife of his nephew **Edward Berry**, who lived and worked in Bordighera, gave Clarence a blank album in vellum binding. Having filled the album with images and writing, Clarence typically gave it back to Margaret. With the passage of time, the work took on an *Arts & Crafts* style, for example the motifs and the colours of the flower featured would be used in the framing and illumination of the text.

Then Bicknell indulged himself in whimsical nonsense in stories or poems for children, illustrated with flowers of course. Most of these works serve to anthropomorphise one or more plants, i.e. to bring them alive as speaking characters in his play. He loved puzzles, riddles, jokes, puns and parlour games. He made a botanical version of the popular Victorian game of Happy Families. This is a Victorian habit taken to extremes by another Englishman on the Italian Riviera, **Edward Lear** (1812-1888) an artist, illustrator, musician, author and poet. Their delight in playful fantasy also has much in common with the nonsense of **Lewis Carroll** (1832-1898) who is known to have been in the company of Lear, and with writer **George MacDonald** (1824-1905), Clarence's neighbour in Bordighera. These three men are referenced in the exhibition.

The exhibition, subject to approvals, provides a notable premiere, images of the works by Clarence Bicknell stored in the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, in England. These images have never been seen in public in the UK. The Fitzwilliam has 7 albums of 405 watercolours and illuminated pages of poems and fantasies, donated by Marcus's uncle Peter Bicknell in 1980. One of the books is called "The Triumph of the Dandelion"; Clarence emphasises how one of nature's most common plants is also its most beautiful. Other albums are named "Wild Flowers of Val Fontanalba 1909", "Spring Flowers Children's Picture Book" and "A Book of Berries". List in the Annex available in the long form of this document.



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Annex 1: The Selling Points for a Sponsor

Who are the most suitable sponsors and why would they want to fund the Clarence Bicknell exhibition?

1. **Discovery:** Clarence Bicknell is not well known outside Liguria between Bordighera and Genoa; exhibition visitors and others will have the joy and fascination of discovering a talent which they did not know about. Bicknell has not been “done to death” and his work remains fresh.
2. **Fashion in art and relevance today:** Bicknell’s work is closely related to other art movements which have found public acclaim in this century for example the arts-and-crafts movement of William Morris, John Ruskin and others; the pre-Raphaelites like William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and the Rossettis; symmetrical floral patterns like de Morgan’s celebrated at the Guildhall Gallery in the 2019 *Sublime Symmetry* exhibition; the *Stuff and Nonsense*¹ of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear who were both inspired by visiting Liguria in Bicknell’s time
3. The merits of maintaining and promoting **Intangible Cultural Heritage**; this consists of nonphysical intellectual wealth, such as folklore, customs, beliefs, traditions, knowledge, and language. Intangible cultural heritage is considered by member states of UNESCO in relation to the tangible World Heritage focusing on intangible aspects of culture and by the European Union for the allocation of funding.
4. **Clarence Bicknell’s Intangible Cultural Heritage** is consciousness of the environment; appreciation of the flora of the world; bringing joy to the world through his evolution of botanical art, poems and whimsy; the force of the citizen scientist²; meticulous recording of observations and images of the archaeology and botany he specialised in³; creation of museums and collections for preserving research work for future generations; sharing of research through a network of polyvalent researchers and writers; use of Esperanto as a universal language to further spread knowledge; use of resources and energy to help his fellow man; his dedication to the culture of a valued botanical and archaeological area, Liguria in northwest Italy and the Maritime Alps of France and Italy⁴.
5. **Anglo-Italian Relations.** A sponsor with interests both in Italy and the UK will derive benefit from the inter-national aspects of the artist and the exhibition. The Guildhall Gallery exhibition in London will be followed by the same materials and excitement at a Genoa exhibition to be organised thereafter. The exhibitions are supported by the Anglo-Italian thrust of the next **Lord Mayor of London, Michael Mainelli**⁵, the **Mayor of Genoa, Marco Bucci**, by Genoa’s Honorary **Ambassador to the World Francesca Centurione-Scotto Boschieri** (also President of the Friends of the Hanbury Gardens) by the Anglo-Italian round table and by other stakeholders.
6. **The media buzz** will provide attractive background to the sponsors’ cross-border activities, corporate and social responsibility and hospitality opportunities like exhibition invitations, launch parties, VIP visits and encounters with the movers and shakers of the London-Genoa axis.

¹ <https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2019/08/stuff-and-nonsense-lewis-carroll-and-edward-lear.html>

² Professor Mauro Mariotti of the University of Genoa explains why Bicknell is such a perfect *citizen scientist*: https://www.clarencebicknell.com/images/downloads_news/clarence_bicknell_citizen_scientist_mariotti_2019.pdf (in Italian and English)

³ There are 38,000 artefacts and drawings made by Clarence Bicknell in 55 collections in 10 countries

⁴ As perpetuated and supported by the EU under their Interreg V-A - ALCOTRA programme

⁵ Subject to confirmation by their Mayoralty process <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-us/about-the-city-of-london-corporation/lord-mayor/about-mayoral-appraisal-process>

Annex 2: The Vellum Albums

“Margaret Berry was at Lorenzini’s, an artists’ supply shop in Siena in 1897, when she noticed some magnificent volumes of first-class drawing paper, bound in white vellum – the perfect gift for *The Uncle* as she called Clarence and indeed, it was. Some months later he returned the album to her, but now it was filled with watercolours of wildflowers. The annual albums, of which a dozen are known today, represent Clarence’s most creative art.

“The *Casa Fontanalba Visitors’ Book*, one of Clarence’s masterpieces, was prepared for the opening of his mountain home in 1906. It is an album of forty cartridge-paper sheets, bound in vellum with leather decorative stitch work, and measures 265 mm x 340mm (10½ x 13½ inches). Clarence illustrated every page on the right with watercolours of flora of the region; the left pages remained blank for guests to sign their names and add the date.

“Each vellum album contained a theme that had special meaning for Margaret, or for the person he dedicated it to. For instance, Clarence named one of the albums *A Book of Berries*, a play on Margaret and Edward Berry’s name. *The Posy*, a book of poems (*la poésie* in French) decorated with appropriate flowers had several *marguerites*, a play on the name Margaret. In 1911, to celebrate the coronation of King George V the previous year, he created a coronation procession of flowers. Another album, dated 1914, is an elaborate fantasy, *The Triumph of the Dandelion*, in which flowers compete to win *The Order of the Golden Lion*. Page by page each flower is illustrated presenting its claim in enchanting if somewhat sentimental prose and verse, and the common wild dandelion, rated by Clarence as his favourite flower, is the winner. “

MARVELS – *The Life of Clarence Bicknell*, Valerie Lester 2018

a) Wild Plants growing in the Rock Garden of Casa Fontanalba; a Children’s Picture Book 1908			Bicknell
b) The Casa Fontanalba visitors’ book, signed by each visitor		1906	Bicknell
c) The Book of Guests in Esperanto;		1906-1918	Bicknell
d) A Book of Berries	PD.6-1980	c 1908	Fitzwilliam
e) Cultivated and Wild Flowers	PD.5-1980	c 1911	Fitzwilliam
f) Spring Flowers Children's Picture Book	PD.7-1980	c 1909	Fitzwilliam
g) A Posy	PD.8-1980	c 1910	Fitzwilliam
h) Wild Flowers of Val Fontanalba and neighbourhood	PD.9-1980	1908	Fitzwilliam
i) Sketchbook paper	PD.10-1980	c 1912	Fitzwilliam
j) The Triumph of the Dandelion	PD.11-1980	1914	Fitzwilliam

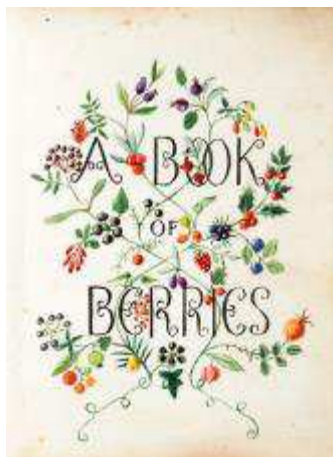
Bicknell - Bicknell family collection marcus@bicknell.com
 Fitzwilliam - Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge



Annex 3: Clarence's private possessions and other artefacts

In a secure glass display cabinet we will show some possessions of Clarence's from the Museo Bicknell (subject to agreement from the IISL) and the Bicknell family collection.

- Clarence's Bible ((Bicknell family)
- Book of Guests in Esperanto (Bicknell family)
- Children's Book of Wild Plants (Bicknell family)
- Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book (Bicknell family)
- Magic lantern (Mercede Pollini descendants)
- Microscope (Bicknell family or IISL)
- Paint box (Bicknell family)
- Secondary Paint box (Bicknell family)
- Vasculum (cylindrical tin for collecting flowers) (Bicknell family)
- Clarence's watch chain with a silver badge of the *Societa Spiritu Sanctis* and two jade pendants (Bicknell family)
- Moulded relief of Clarence's head (Bicknell family)
- Several hotebooks and sketch books Magic lantern (Mercede Pollini descendants)
- Microscope (Bicknell family or IISL)
- Paint box (Bicknell family)
- Secondary Paint box (Bicknell family)
- Vasculum (cylindrical tin for collecting flowers) (Bicknell family)
- Clarence's watch chain with a silver badge of the *Societa Spiritu Sanctis* and two jade pendants (Bicknell family)
- Moulded relief of Clarence's head (Bicknell family)



Annex 4: The Arts & Crafts Movement

The Arts and Crafts movement was an international movement in the decorative and fine arts that began in Britain and flourished in Europe and North America between 1880 and 1910, emerging in Japan in the 1920s. It stood for traditional craftsmanship using simple forms, and often used medieval, romantic, or folk styles of decoration. It advocated economic and social reform and was essentially anti-industrial. It had a strong influence on the arts in Europe until it was displaced by Modernism in the 1930s, and its influence continued among craft makers, designers, and town planners long afterwards.

The term was first used by **T. J. Cobden-Sanderson** at a meeting of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1887, although the principles and style on which it was based had been developing in England for at least twenty years. It was inspired by the ideas of architect **Augustus Pugin**, writer **John Ruskin**, and designer **William Morris**.

The movement developed earliest and most fully in the British Isles, and spread across the British Empire and to the rest of Europe and North America. It was largely a reaction against the perceived impoverished state of the decorative arts at the time and the conditions in which they were produced.

William Morris (1834–1896), the towering figure in late 19th century design, was the main influence on the Arts and Crafts movement. But the Arts and Crafts philosophy derived in large measure from John Ruskin's social criticism, which related the moral and social health of a nation to the qualities of its architecture and to the nature of work. Ruskin (1819–1900) considered the sort of mechanized production and division of labour that had been created in the industrial revolution to be "servile labour" and he thought that a healthy and moral society required independent workers who designed the things they made. His followers favoured craft production over industrial manufacture and were concerned about the loss of traditional skills, but they were arguably more troubled by effects of the factory system than by machinery itself and William Morris's idea of "handicraft" was essentially work without any division of labour rather than work without any sort of machinery.

John Ruskin was a neighbour in Herne Hill, London, of **Elhanan Bicknell**, Clarence's father. Ruskin would have met the 23-years-younger Clarence there, and it is not impossible that **Clarence Bicknell** (1842-1918) would have been informed of, or even influenced by, Ruskin's thinking. It is not clear from Bicknell's letters and work whether he worked in the Arts & Craft style because he was influenced by the movement or because he instinctively enjoyed the craft of doing things with his own hand, using folk styles or developing the patterns and colours inspired by nature. We can guess that both influence and instinct played a part.

John Ruskin and William Morris founded the **Art Workers' Guild** in 1884 to break down barriers between architects, artists, designers and makers. **Julian Bicknell**, Marcus Bicknell's brother, is a past Master of the Art Workers' Guild, and in 2017 a Director and Committee member

Online sources including Wikipedia, the Arts & Craft Museum and the V&A

Annex 5: Panels created for the acclaimed exhibition in Bordighera in 2017

Marcus Bicknell was awarded in 2017 the annual *Parmurelu d'Oru* prize for his work on the culture of Liguria, his support for the Museo Bicknell, for promoting the town of Bordighera and for his creation and promotion abroad of the documentary film "The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell". The award ceremony took place in the Anglicana in Bordighera where Susie and Marcus Bicknell has mounted a two week exhibition of Clarence's art. These panels will be developed for use in the 2024 exhibition.

Panel 1: Introductory Panel

Clarence Bicknell (1842-1918) was a man of letters, an artist, author, traveller, botanist, archaeologist, pastor, humanist and Esperantist. Born in London, Clarence was the 13th child of Elhanan Bicknell, whale oil magnate and art patron; after studying at Cambridge University he became an Anglican priest, and from 1879 lived in Bordighera on the Italian coast between Menton and Genoa; he died at his summer home nearby in Casterino in the high mountains of the Franco-Italian border on 17th July 1918.

Clarence is best known for his meticulous recording of the thousands of prehistoric engravings of the Mont Bego. His greatest passion lay in flowers and plants. This small exhibition shows how Bicknell's passion for flowers and the stories they inspired was expressed in the wonderful vellum albums that he did for family and friends, revealing his artistic and design talents, and in his landscape paintings of the Bordighera region. Some well-known images of Bicknell would be included.

Panel 2: Clarence's Botanical Art

According to his niece Margaret Berry (Bio sketch 1918), Clarence was from an early age drawing and painting the wild flowers that he collected. His mother Lucinda was a talented artist. But it was only when he settled in Bordighera in 1878 and botany became his principal interest that he developed his skill as a botanical artist. Within 5 years he had done over 1,100 botanical watercolours. In 1885, he published "*Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*" with 82 plates and notes on 280 species.

The two images below are black-and-white proofs of plates from *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*, coloured by hand by Clarence (Bicknell family collection).



Clarence was greatly respected as a botanist, as is evidenced by his communications with many of the leading botanists of the day such as Emile Burnat in Switzerland and Harold Stuart Thompson in the UK (who in fact used some of Clarence's plates in his own book "*Flowering Plants of the Riviera*" published in 1914).

The two images are from *Flowering Plants and Ferns of the Riviera*, but, this time, full-colour plates from a finished copy of the book.



Clarence's second most important botanical work, *"Flora of Bordighera and San Remo"*, published in 1896, did not have illustrations. This may have been because he was becoming more and more absorbed by the study of the prehistoric rock engravings up in the Maritime Alps, and where he would later spend 12 summers up in the hamlet of Casterino. There he became entranced by the Alpine plants which he continued to study, while at the same time recording the engravings.

Panel 3: Creative release from the arduous work of botanical and archaeological recording

Drawing and painting accurate botanical figures was painstaking work. Just as demanding mentally, but also even more exhausting physically, was recording the 11,000 plus rock engravings that he did from 1897 onwards: long days with many hours walking, then crouching, lying or kneeling taking rubbings on paper with wax, then back down to his home, the Casa Fontanalba, to annotate the work of the day. (have still photo from film of making rubbing)

We sense that Clarence's artistic talents flourished when he could let his creative and design skills come to the fore. He was versatile and he experimented with many media. But, throughout, floral subjects dominated, especially so in the many vellum-bound albums he did for relations and friends and to record visitors to the Casa Fontanalba.

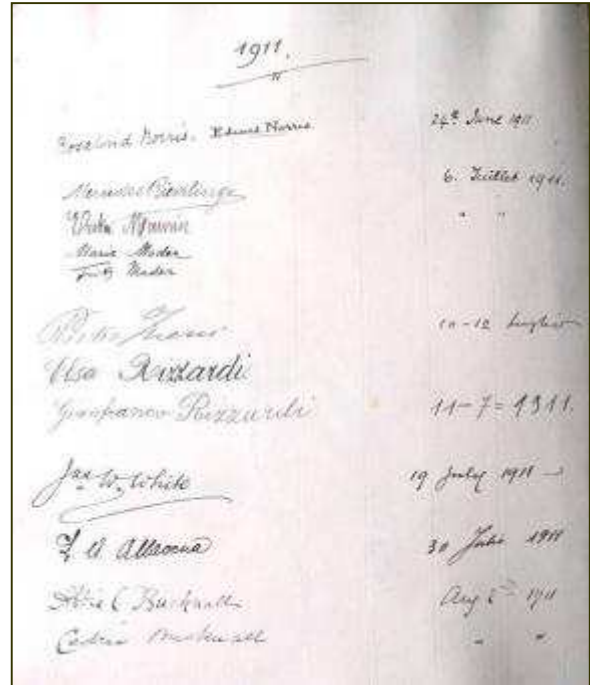


Labels for images above: right-hand pages from

the Casa Fontanalba visitors' book

Panel 4: Vellum Albums: The Visitors' Book and Esperanto Visitor's Book.

Instead of having a standard book for signatures by the many visitors to the Casa Fontanalba (in 10 years he had over 250 visitors who made their way up the mountain road), he illustrated in advance each right-hand page with a flower and a matching border



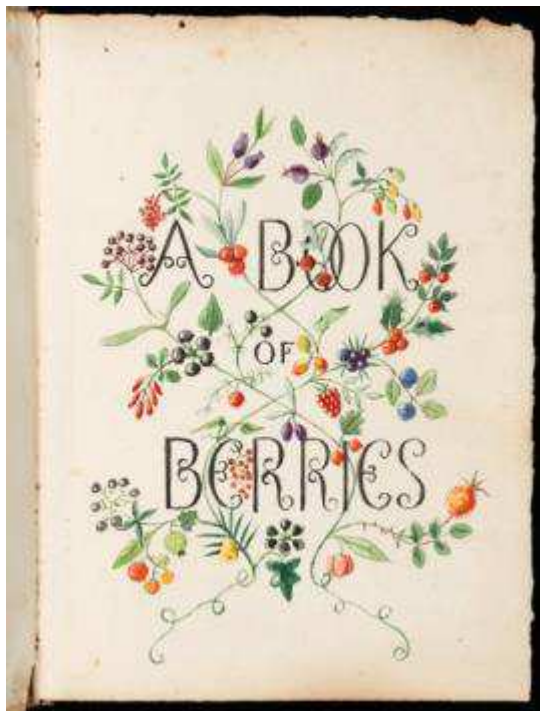
He also created a more elaborate book, with a page written by himself in Esperanto for each of the more favoured and more frequent visitors, again illustrated with plants. On the left is the page dedicated to the eminent French archaeologist, Emile Cartaillec, suitably headed with Clarence's montage of some of the prehistoric rock engravings. On each page Clarence uses a matching colour and motifs on both pages.

There are pages for a dozen famous botanists with whom Clarence corresponded, and 125 friends, family and other visitors, all with an entry and a short note in Esperanto.



Panel 5. Vellum Albums dedicated to Margaret Berry

Nearly every year from 1897, Clarence dedicated a floral illustrated album to his niece Margaret Berry. Each album has a theme - for instance, one is a book of marguerites for Margaret; one is a Book of Berries for the Berrys; another is a book of flowers from the Val Fontanalba; another is a book of poems decorated with appropriate flowers. The album dated 1911 is a coronation procession of the flowers of Fontanalba to celebrate the coronation of King George V. The last dated 1914 is an elaborate fantasy, The Triumph of the Dandelion.



Clockwise from top left:

Cover for "A Book of Berries"

Final page of Clarence's last album "The Triumph of the Dandelion". Clarence adored wild flowers, and the simplest and the commonest were the best.

These fritilleries, competing to be for best wild flower, are named after Moggridge and Burnat, eminent botanists.

Panel 6: Influence of the Arts and Craft Movement

The Arts and Crafts Movement in England was in full swing in Clarence's lifetime. He would no doubt have had lots of sympathy with the main tenets of the movement, born of a reaction to many of the disastrous effects of industrial manufacture and unregulated trade both on society and culture. Mass production meant that the workman no longer had any part in the creative process. In the 1860s and 1870s, artists, designers and architects began to pioneer new approaches to design and the decorative arts. The aims included bringing back into prominence the notion of the artisan artist-craftsman and taking inspiration from nature.

All this influence is reflected in Clarence's love of the simple life he preferred up in the mountains and his art work, particularly in the albums for Margaret Berry.



Clarence has a distinctive feature to many of his floral designs: it is as if he is viewing them through a kaleidoscope.

Clarence Bicknell's dandelion design (left),
and the great French designer Eugene Grasset's waterlilies (right);

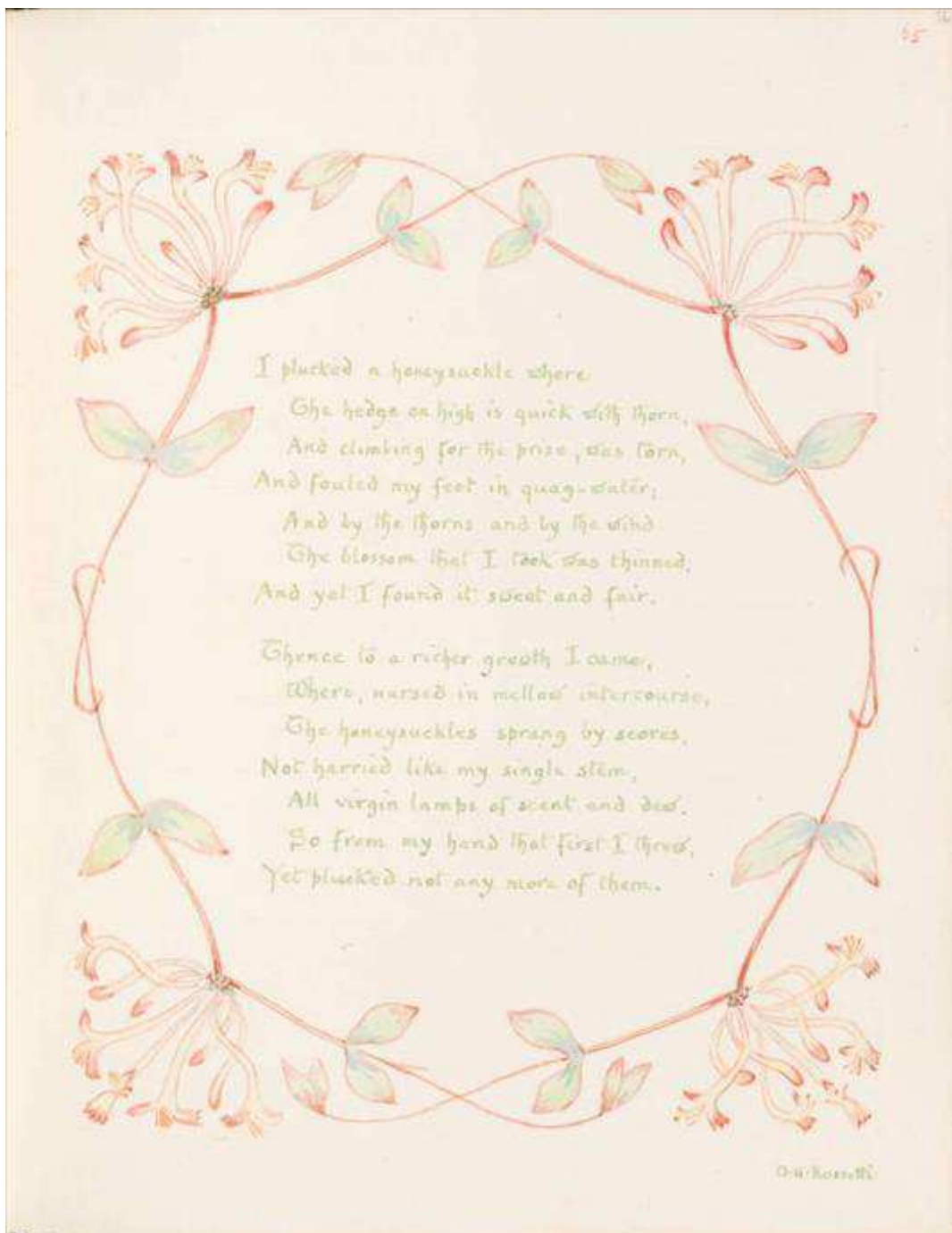


Surely Clarence was influenced by the designers of the Arts and Crafts Movement, for example, Walter Crane and William Morris below:



Panel 7: Fantasy and Flowers

In the creation of these albums, Clarence could have fun with flowers, a complete contrast to his strict archaeological and botanical work. Doing such books was very much in the Victorian tradition. Illustrated poetic books were very popular gifts to be treasured and prominently displayed in the drawing-room. Some of Clarence's albums – such as *The Children's Picture Book* – had serious botanical descriptions opposite each painting, but in others and in particular in the albums for Margaret Barry, Clarence let his design and poetic inspiration flow.



In "The Posy" album, Clarence features a poem by his famous neighbour in Bordighera, George Macdonald, dedicated to the Primrose, another simple flower.



Clarence's delight in playful fantasy occasionally encroached into his more serious art. On the left we show his frontispiece of an album in which a cat sitting on a log represents "catalogue" - "cat a log"

Clarence's poem for the fine Alpine Anemone:

We are the Alpine Anemone
 And either white or lemony
 We love the wind.
 He is so kind
 Each day at home
 To brush and comb
 Our purple hair.

He even did a botanical version of the popular card game "Happy Families" for Margaret Berry (picture below).



Panel 8: MARVELS the film

The 2018 Film *The Marvels of Clarence Bicknell* by director Rémy Masségia provides 18 minutes of rich mountain and art footage for projection in a loop and multiple still images.

Include boards with some Clarence quotes to emphasise his passion for wild flowers: e.g:

“It is strange how I have gradually been losing my love for gardens to the country – any field or common hedge now interests me more than the best garden with all sorts of wonderful plants”



“This is the supreme moment when I look at my garden and marvel....I would not exchange this scrap of bank for all of the garden in Peradeniya, Ceylon, or that in Java or Kew..... what a blaze of colour. Every day I think I have never seen anything quite so beautiful... I keep saying so to the others. Maddalena (*his cook*) must consider me to be crazy.”



(letter to the Baroness von Taube from Casterino on 10 July 1914)

The exhibit could feature some items for sale including the life-size art reproduction of the Casa Fontanalba Visitors' Book and of the Book of Guests in Esperanto with translations into English, French and Italian.



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M Bicknell 30 March 2023