



Clarence Bicknell at his home in Bordighera © Clarence Bicknell Association

# Clarence Bicknell Centenary

## A look at the man who catalogued Liguria

By NICOLE RUSKELL

Artist. Botanist. Conservationist. Linguist. Archaeologist. Clarence Bicknell defies classification, but this Victorian researcher devoted his life to the discovery and catalogue of Liguria's flora. He single-handedly catalogued thousands of plants and trees along the Italian coast, creating one of the most thorough botanical libraries in the region. 2018 marked 100 hundred years since his passing. Here we look at his tireless work in the hills of Liguria.

**T**he breadth of Clarence Bicknell's work spans not only decades, but also genres. He is most known for his extensive study of botany and the discovery of the cave drawings of Tende, but he was

also a priest, an artist, a collector, an alpinist and a pioneer of the universal language Esperanto.

His life's work of watercolours journals, diaries, cave rubbings, pressed flowers and re-

search journals (around 38,000 pieces) are housed in 36 different museums around the world. The bulk of his research, however, has been donated to the University of Genoa library.

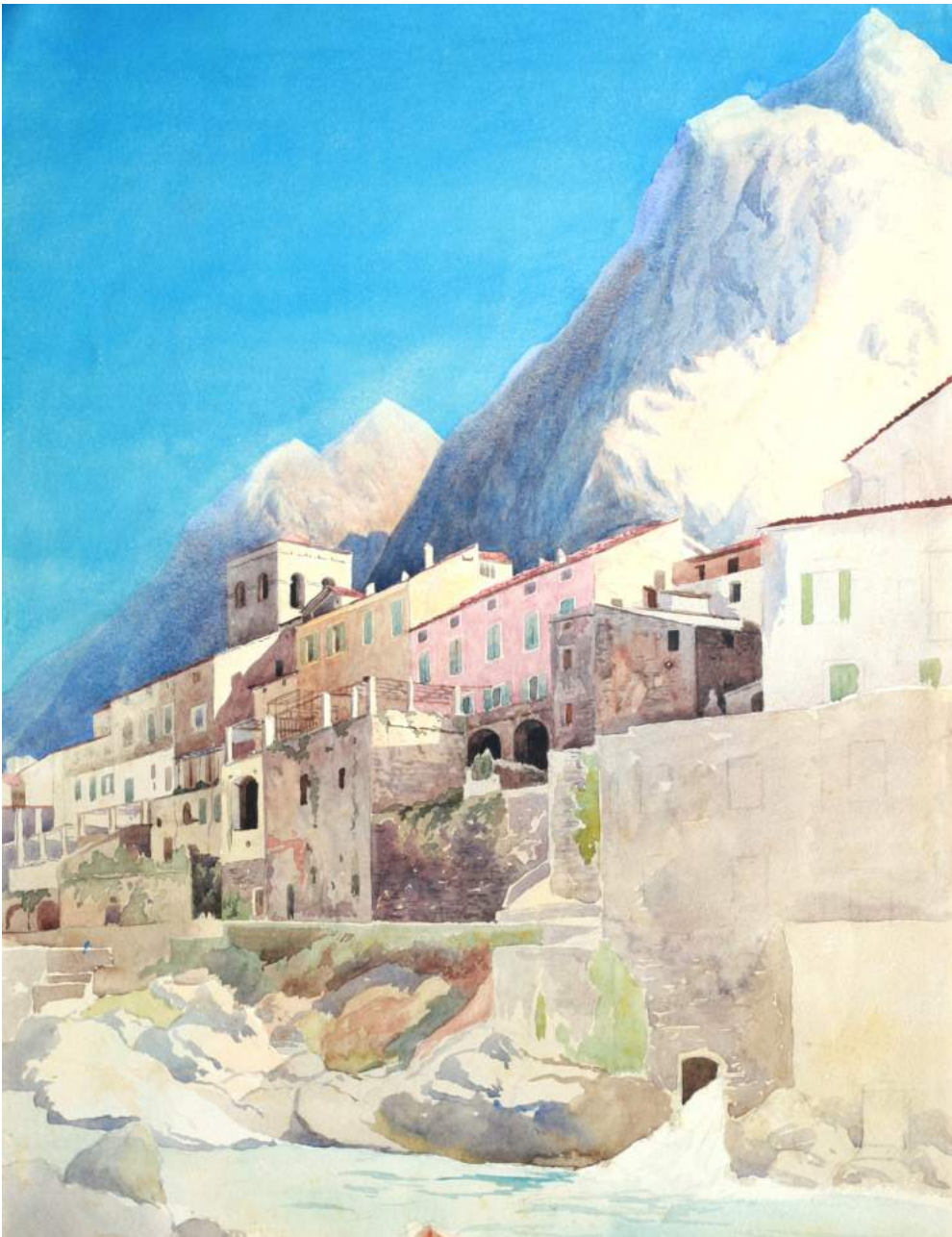
Clarence started his life as an Anglican minister. He travelled the world as a missionary, but after a few years became disillusioned with the inside politics of church life, describing the inner workings of the clergy as a 'chauvinist culture' and left the church for good. A strict believer in equal rights, democracy and freedom of expression, Clarence was more of a Renaissance man than a Victorian. He was years ahead of his time, a vegetarian pacifist, environmental activist, a creative and playful artist and an enthusiastic supporter of the women's suffrage movement. He was, perhaps, better suited to our current era than to the 19th century.

Shortly after breaking from the church, he received an invitation to join friends in Bordighera. It was there, in the small Ligurian town that he discovered his true passion. Bordighera, with its lush green mountains, explosive flowers and deep blue sea inspired him like nothing else before. In 1878, at the age of 36, he purchased Villa Rosa, the house of his hosts, where he would spend the rest of his life devoted to the town, its flora and the local community.

### The artist

One of 13 children, Clarence grew up in an unusual situation. Clarence's father, Elhanan, was an avid art collector and friends of many artists of the day. Their home on Heme Hill in London was filled with paintings of living artists, either commissioned or purchased directly from the artists. Legendary painter, JMW Turner was a good family





Water colour painted by Bicknell © Clarence Bicknell Association

friend and spent a great deal of time at the Bicknell residence. Often painting in the Bicknell home, Clarence grew up watching Turner create masterpieces right before his eyes, learning from a young age to see the world as an artist.

Clarence was highly creative, experimenting with any type of art and craft from furniture, rugs and ceramics, to watercolour paintings, pastel sketches and lithographic etchings. He wrote poems and verse about flowers and illustrated the pages with intricate floral designs.

### The Botanist

The richness of the flora in and around Bordighera inspired Clarence to no end. He immediately began collecting plants, cataloguing them and painting exquisitely detailed watercolours in his journals. He started in his own garden and moved further out

into the countryside to discover new and unknown plants. Within a few years of his arrival, he had created over a thousand drawings.

In 1885 he published his first book, *Flowering plants and ferns of the Riviera*, covering 280 species with 82 colour illustrations. In the book, he complains that many of the plants along the coast could no longer be found, 'owing to the ravages committed by horticulturists' agents and winter visitors.' At the time, the Italian Riviera was more popular with English visitors than the Côte d'Azur, and the Italian population of Bordighera outnumbered by the British. With the continual arrival of new sun-seekers, he took the disappearance of plants personally. He wrote: 'Every autumn, too...a new road or villa or vineyard has caused the disappearance of some favourite old friends.' It's painful to think what he would say about the area

today. His second book was published in 1896, a reference work titled *Flora of Bordighera and San Remo*, describing the area as unparalleled in its variety of flora. Stating that with his advancing age, it was time to publish a catalogue of 'our plants.'

Clarence's collection of plants and his detailed drawings proved invaluable for many celebrated botanists of the day. His work was used in numerous other books, including plates of his watercolours as illustration.

In total, he made over 3,000 flower paintings and added 73 species to the list of known Ligurian plants. Today, the majority of his work is conserved in the Hanbury Institute at the University of Genoa. Four hundred of his flower designs can also be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum of his alma mater, Cambridge University.

### The archaeologist

Always exploring further and further, Clarence spent many summers hiking the Maritime Alps near Tende (then part of Italy). In these mountains, known as the Merveilles, Clarence discovered many intriguing cave drawings. These ancient Bronze Age petroglyphs were known, but no one had studied them or tried to understand them. Fascinated with this ancient form of language, Clarence devoted the remaining years of his life to studying the prehistoric images. By his death in 1918, he had created rubbings of 7,428 figures from Val Fontalba, 5,139 in the Merveilles district and 151 figures found in the valleys surrounding Monte Bego.

He classified the different figures into eight categories, including horned figures, ploughs, weapons, men, huts and property. These figures related to daily life in the mountains, similar to how shepherds high in Piedmont continue to live. Today, many of the engravings are protected by the Mercantour National Park, prohibiting the public from approaching the images. Nevertheless, many of the engravings have been destroyed by weather or property development, leaving Clarence's rubbings the only record of their existence.

Despite his life's work in botany, his petroglyph research gained him the most notoriety in the scientific community.

### The Centenary

Clarence Bicknell's descendants, who run the Clarence Bicknell Association have worked hard to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his life's work. This year, his great-grand-niece published an intimate biography, "Marvels: The life of Clarence Bicknell" and the association released a short documentary, "The marvels of Clarence Bicknell." Throughout 2018 there have been exhibits across Liguria, the Côte d'Azur and the UK. *Omaggio a Clarence Bicknell*, a series of events and exhibitions throughout Liguria is still ongoing. ▀

[www.clarencebicknell.com](http://www.clarencebicknell.com)