Cultural Conflict in Ilfracombe: Fern-Collecting, and the Cottage Garden Society’s Prize-Giving Controversy of 1860

ANDREW JACKSON, ARRAN HART, TRACEY JONES AND RACHEL MAXEY

Introduction

In Ilfracombe Museum copies are to be found of the town’s oldest surviving newspaper, Bright’s Intelligencer and Arrival List for Ilfracombe, Lynton, and Lynmouth. The publication appeared, generally weekly, through June to September of 1860, followed by one monthly edition only for November 1860 and subsequently for the months of January to May 1861. The newspaper was then replaced by the Ilfracombe Chronicle. The availability of the Intelligencer and the Chronicle can be found noted in local directories.¹ Their fortunes have also been acknowledged in other published historical research.²

The front pages of the Intelligencer are especially illuminating. Cover-page space is generally dominated by a lead editorial, in which the editor sets out what ought to be considered among the more pressing or prominent of current local issues. Most of the cover pages also incorporate a ‘Local News’ section, with brief summaries of notable events or concerns. A reading of those editions published between June and September 1860 can give readers today a sense of what was felt to be most newsworthy in the town through one summer season, and at a time of great change for Ilfracombe – at least in the view of the Intelligencer’s editor. An indexing and analysis of the content

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pointed towards those topics that attracted most front-page attention. Not surprisingly, the editor devotes most coverage to the manner in which the town was developing and its prospects as an emerging resort. The editor’s articles regularly highlight particular debates and issues arising in relation to the improvement of the town and aspirations for it, for example: the need to upgrade water supply, expanding provision for visitors, and making way for the arrival of the railway. This article considers a controversy that emerged in 1860 in relation to the ‘cult’ of natural history collecting, and how this clashed with established local attitudes and practices.

**Narrative**

On 6 July 1860, the ‘Local News’ column on the front page of the *Intelligencer* included a brief note on the forthcoming exhibition of the Cottage Garden Society. It was to be the Society’s first of the season, scheduled for the eleventh of the month in the town’s Assembly Rooms, with non-members being admissible at one o’clock upon the payment of a shilling.

One week later, and two days following the show, the subsequent edition of the *Intelligencer* bore on its front page, in the local news column, a report on the event. ‘The show was pronounced to be good in quality’, the newspaper records, ‘the potatoes and fruit especially showing few symptoms of the late severe weather’. The Society’s President, Thomas Stabb Esq., referring to the table of prizes (see Table 1), observed that the weather had diminished the quality of the produce entered under the category of flowers.

**Table 1. ‘Analytical Table of Prizes’**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prizes</th>
<th>Ilfracombe</th>
<th>Berry</th>
<th>Combehart</th>
<th>Morthoe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vegetables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fruit</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flowers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Straw-work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The editor of the *Intelligencer* was clearly impressed by the work of the Society. The greater part of the front page of the edition of 13 July is also given over to an editorial on ‘Cottage Gardens’.6 The column commences grandly, quoting Lord Bacon:

A garden...is the purest of human pleasures – and a man shall ever see, that, when ages grow to civility and elegance, men come to build stately, sooner that to garden finely; as if gardening were the greater perfection.

The cottage garden could not aspire to what was achieved in the ‘princely’ garden: the ‘fairest flowers and greenest shrubs’, ‘stately arched hedges’, ‘verdant alleys’, ‘glittering fountains’; ‘wherein art accumulates and arranges with more or less success that which nature has made beautiful’. Nonetheless, there are ‘gardens and gardens’, and the cottage garden, for the *Intelligencer’s* editor, also possessed worth:

gardens wherein flaunting holly-hock and sunflower grow side by side with scented herbs, and humble vegetables, and early ripening fruit, wherein art does but little and nature much for those who get their daily bread by daily toil within the narrow limits of their several ‘landed properties’.

Though lacking in land and capital, the editor goes on to observe, the ‘poor man’ working his cottage garden could still ‘garden “artistically”, that is to say, in as perfect and knowledgeable way as possible’, and in ‘the most economical and productive manner’. To this end cottage garden societies had emerged across England, their objectives being fivefold. First, the cottage garden society brought the ‘stimulus of competition’. Second, the ‘Cottage-Garden-Show Market’ provided exhibitors with a welcome opportunity to sell their produce. Third, the societies provide a means through which knowledge and possession of new and good varieties, seeds, cuttings, among other things, could be spread. Fourth, cottage gardening supported and encouraged a variety of important related activities, ‘such as bee-keeping, straw-bonnet making, knitting, and so forth’. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the societies had secured a place for things artistic in cottage gardening:

They promote and foster whatever talent for decorative art may be latent in the objects of their foresight, by holding out rewards for taste in the arrangement of nosegays, sample baskets of fruit and vegetables, and floral devices.
At the show, the *Intelligencer* adds, Thomas Stabb had called for greater support for the Society from local residents and visitors, given the benefit that they derived from the supply of produce from the Society’s gatherings. He also aimed to achieve an expansion of the committee, and, in order to increase both interest and the number of show competitors, announced to the gathering the committee’s ‘determination that native ferns should for the future be admitted for exhibition’.

On 7 September, the *Intelligencer* included a front-page announcement on the forthcoming Autumn show: ‘In spite of the unfavourable season the exhibition of vegetables promises fairly.’ The note continues with the reminder that the Society was looking forward to the introduction of ‘a novel feature of interest’: ‘prizes for the best collection and rarest specimens of ferns indigenous to the locality’.

One week later, on 14 September, Ilfracombe’s *Intelligencer* reported on the Cottage Garden Society’s autumnal exhibition. The show of produce had not been ‘large in quantity’, but it ‘was wonderfully good in quality, and especially so considering the wet and sunless weather which has prevailed of late’, with the following being of possible interest ‘to those who like to extract kernels out of the hard-shelled nut of statistics’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prizes</th>
<th>Ilfracombe</th>
<th>Berry.</th>
<th>Combemartin</th>
<th>Morthoe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straw-work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The report continues, celebrating the success of the new feature of the show:

The show of ferns, a commendable novelty, was remarkably good. The first prize for the best collection of N. Devon ferns was gained by John Dadds of
Ilfracombe, who exhibited no less than 56 varieties, and the same exhibitor carried off the first prize for the rarest and best single specimen of an indigenous fern.

The record of the show concludes with a summary of the address of the Society's President, who 'commented on the excellent quality of the show in general and of the ferns in particular'. Thomas Stabb also reminded the gathering to put prize winnings to due and worthy purpose:

Money hoarded was money lost, that they should gain to spend, and there were few ways of spending money so good as the providing a sound and extended education for their children, who would one day thank them for so great a benefit.

By 21 September, however, it is apparent that 'much gainsaying' at the 'novelty and apparent anomaly' of awarding prizes for ferns had come to the attention of the Intelligencer's editor. The lead article, entitled 'Rewards', relates:

'What!' cried a large and largely indignant patron of the proceedings, 'give seven shillings for a quantity of green stuff out of the hedges, scraped together by men who neglect their usual work and their families' interest for the purpose, when a basket of sound potatoes is rewarded only with a shilling or two! I wonder which is best for dinner!'

The editor, though, was unsympathetic, with the article promptly retorting:

Clearly all argument is thrown away upon an individual who looks at surrounding objects through the medium of his stomach. For such a person we have no reply; potatoes are best for him and other animals, ferns and pearls are thrown away on them.

The piece follows with an 'explanation (if such indeed be needed)' on the economic meaning and realities of 'rewards':

Consider the money, labour, and time involved in gathering together the prize collection of Ferns on this occasion – a collection which was probably worth some £12 or £15 – and contrast it with the time and labour expended in
producing one basket of potatoes: remember too that the potatoes are sold on the spot at the price which they are worth, and that a very small part of the Fern collection is disposed of; and then say whether the prize-money is unfairly distributed.

The editor, having articulated the economic case for awarding a prize for fern collecting, turns to the forceful cultural argument:

It is something to have taught the cottagers that money’s worth exists in our woods, way-sides, and combes; on our cliffs, downs, and sea-bord: it is something greater to have directed their attention to natural beauty of form, to the appreciation of minute distinctions of texture and construction, and to have brought them into contact with those minds who have learnt to value the beautiful as well as the useful, and to believe that man was intended for higher ends than to become a successful caterer of potatoes for dinner, or of apples for desert.

The article of 21 September 1860 concludes with a note of encouragement. The Intelligencer had little to say by way of criticism. The controversy surrounding awards for collections of rare indigenous ferns did not constitute grounds for calling this ‘most useful and excellently-managed society’ to account.

Discussion

Through the Victorian period the demand for provincial newspapers grew considerably, driven by population expansion and urbanisation, widening education provision, and broader engagement in local politics and government. Moreover, the costs of producing, transporting and supplying newspapers fell, while the consumer base expanded – keen to follow local and regional news as much as what was nationally or internationally of note. In Devon, and elsewhere, the range of provincial newspapers titles widened significantly through the later decades of the nineteenth century.

The seaside resort towns, more specifically, were ideal market settings for some of the early provincial newspapers, with an established population together with a swelling seasonal one with leisure time to pass. The press in these centres made lists available of those taking up residence for ‘the season’, promoted events, facilities and commodities; and had a hand in influencing local standards, behaviour and services. The publication of newspapers was a commercial business, and it was in the interest of proprietors and editors to
enthusiastically promote local places and their cultural life, and be supportive
or, where appropriate, highly critical, of developments that were felt to be
counter to the interests of newspaper readerships.

The content of local newspapers in the resort towns also reflected and
responded to change. Bright’s Intelligencer was published at a time of
transition for Ilfracombe. The town, like others in Devon and nationally, was
at the point of opting for two courses, one being to remain relatively ‘select’,
the other to open up to what railway-line connection and ‘mass’ leisure and
tourism would bring.13 Both the ‘select’ and ‘popular’ phases in the modern
history of Devon’s seaside resorts brought their tensions. Ilfracombe’s fern-
collecting controversy was born of the ‘select’ phase. Middle-class visitors
were in search of both health and cultural ‘improvement’. Philip Gosse’s A
Naturalist’s Rambles on the Devon Coast of 1853 was widely read. Moreover,
in 1861 there followed his Sea-side Pleasure: Sketches in the Neighbourhood
of Ilfracombe, which further motivated the passion for natural-history
collecting.14 It seems that the taste for ferns imposed, for some certainly, a
rather too ‘unnatural’ demand upon the customs and beliefs of the indigenous
population.

It might be asked more specifically whether the prize for that best-in-
show collection of rare indigenous ferns in Ilfracombe in 1860 was worth
it? The conversion of historic values into their equivalence in the present is a
challenging one, and not without its methodological problems. However, The
National Archives offers a calculator that translates sums in the past into their
relative worth, if not to that of today, that of a decade ago, in 2005. For the
complainant cited by the Intelligencer, he or she may have been quite satisfied
and content by a prize of ‘a shilling or two’ being secured by a basket of
winning potatoes; the equivalent of £2.00-4.00 in 2005. However, that same
complainant may have been understandably dissatisfied and very disturbed by
‘a quantity of green stuff’ – ferns – being awarded a prize of 7 shillings; a sum
of £15.00 in value by 2005. The winner, John Dadds, was no doubt delighted,
but his prize may equally have been deemed reasonable and fitting. If the
newspaper editor’s estimate, in September 1860, of the worth of Mr Dadds’
display is a fair one, as much as £12.00 to £15.00, then the prize appears
more than proportionate. Indeed, it is a measure of the passion, interest and
market in ferns that the winning collection of 56 varieties may have attracted
a sale price, in 2005 values, of around £518 to £647.15

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**Dedication.** This brief article has been written in memory of Robin Stanes (1922–2013), a founder member of the Devon History Society. In the closing years of the twentieth century, I co-taught with Robin my first and, I believe, his final course for the then Department of Continuing and Adult Education, University of Exeter. Robin’s avuncular encouragement was most welcome at this early moment in my academic career.

The article is dedicated as well to the memory of Christopher Jago (1946–2014), former editor of the Society’s newsletter. Chris was also an especially fine student of Exeter’s Department of Lifelong Learning (the successor to the DCAE), who, I am fairly certain, would have been amused by the content of this article.

**NOTES**


Dr Andrew Jackson is Head of School of Humanities at Bishop Grosseteste University of Lincoln. He worked for the Department of lifelong learning, University of Exeter, for ten years and is a former editor of *The Devon Historian*. He maintains interest in the work of the Devon History Society and in current research on the local and regional history of Devon, his home county.