

William Houghton, Classical Scholar,Naturalist,Mycologist (1829-1895)

Besides the author of "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life" (1859) which affects our understanding of all living things - Charles Darwin of Shrewsbury (1809-1882), two other Shrewsbury men were significant naturalists in the nineteenth century These were the Reverend William Allport Leighton (1805-1889) and William Phillips (1822-1905). Leighton was a Shrewsbury innkeeper's son and Phillips a Shrewsbury tailor.

One of the often understated facts about the lives of people who lived in the past is how much they were influenced in their accomplishments by others, often in fundamental ways but about which there is little in the written records vital to historians. This story is a classical case of such influence. Such links are both interesting and surprising when discovered.

Leighton was at what we would now describe as primary school with Darwin. He specifically remembered Darwin bringing a flower to school (Darwin was 8 years old) and telling him how his mother (who died in 1817) had taught him that it was possible by looking into the blossom to work out the name of the flower. Leighton was later to produce the first flora of Shropshire in 1840, but mysteriously became interested in fungi-producing the very important Lichen Flora of Great Britain, Ireland and the Channel Islands in 1871. Leighton was a close friend of Phillips. Phillips became interested in fungi "because of William Houghton". Phillips was to produce the first Manual of British Discomycetes with illustrations in 1887. Phillips was not a University man, but both Darwin and Leighton were greatly influenced by Professor Henslow at Cambridge University... My story is about the Reverend William Houghton-who was he, what did he do for natural history and mycology in particular? He lived from 1829-1895, went to Oxford University (Brasenose College) where it seems he was a very fit man, rowing for his College in 1829.

We need to turn to a triangular area of Shropshire, North of Telford, often somewhat bleak, flat and wet, bordered by Crudginton to the West and Newport to the East. Here are the Weald moors, known to few people, and where today there are still comparatively few inhabitants. Criss-crossed with natural and artificial watercourses (which habitats for fish are almost certainly significant to this account), the area was drained for farming by the Duke of Sutherland and later more so under the Commons Improvement Act of 1800. In this triangle we come across a small hamlet Preston-upon-the Weald Moors. It is now principally known for its spectacular (Grade 1) almshouses-called the Hospital, built in 1716-1725 under the will of Lady Catherine Herbert. It is of red brick and stone (see picture) and is now converted into expensive flats. Nearby, almost crushed by huge farm buildings erected in recent years is the parish church of St.Laurence, built of red brick in 1739. The Vicar here from 1860 to 1892 was William Houghton M.A. (Oxon) F.L.S.A. A reminder to us of what he did there as well as the things we will hear about later can be seen in the Parish registers The first entry by him is when he officiated at a

wedding in 1860. The final entry bearing his signature is for a funeral conducted by him 32 years later. He died in Tenby aged 67 leaving £213 net. What else can we find out about him? Born in Liverpool in 1829, he graduated M.A. from Oxford in 1853. In 1858 he was the Headmaster of Solihull Grammar School. In 1859 he was elected F.L.S. During his years at Preston-upon -the Weald Moors his prolific activities can perhaps be sorted under four headings:

1. He wrote books for children
2. He produced scientific papers in a wide range of natural history topics, none of which were on flowering plants.
3. He wrote about fish.
4. He extracted important writing by the Greeks and Romans on fungi.

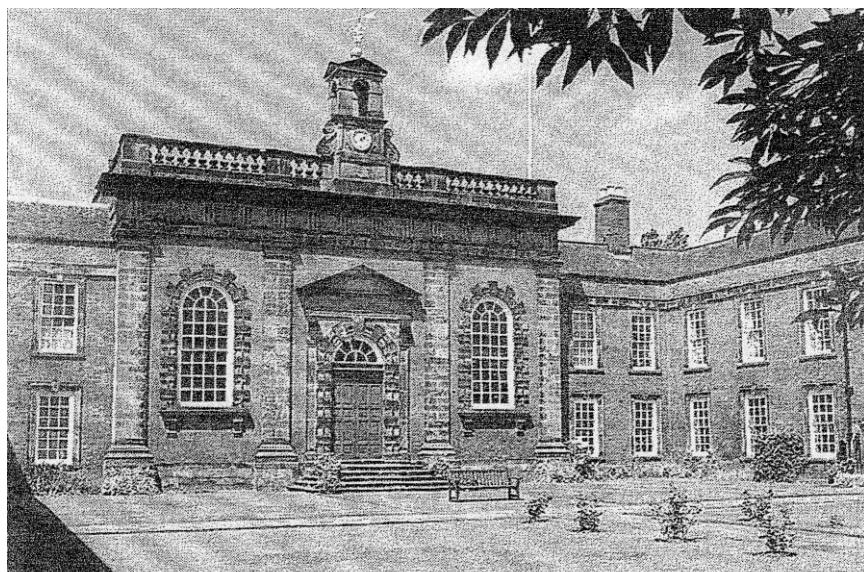
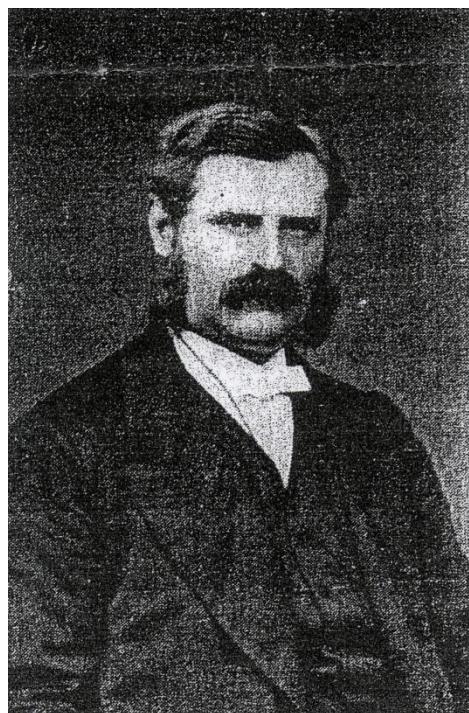
In a short account like the present one it is only possible to glimpse at what he achieved. His two books for children were entitled "Country walks of a naturalist with his children" and "Seaside walks of a naturalist"(1869), the latter overlapping with more serious writing which was to come later on fish. As to his scientific papers these were on many virtually separate topics, molluscs, protozoa, leeches, flatworms, birds, aphids- in 1885 he wrote a paper about the aphid affecting local mangold -wurzel crops in which he describes a fungus-almost certainly an Entomophthora-which he noted killed the aphids. There are no papers here about fungi but he reported his finds on fungal forays if the Woolhope club and from local walks. At least 3 fungi were named after him by others-Clitocybe houghtonii, Pezizicula houghtonii and Hygrophorus houghtonii (now called Hygrophorus lactea). Turning to fishes, he was second in a national essay competition-writing on the "Natural History of Commercial Sea-fishes of Great Britain and Ireland". He also wrote another competition essay entitled "On the Natural History and Cultivation of the Sole"(1883). At this time he produced a huge two volume work, folio size entitled "British Freshwater Fishes". This was illustrated in colour by splendid chromolithographic plates of each species. (Pages of this remarkable book can be viewed in colour, on the internet, inserted under the heading "Darwin Country", Shrewsbury Museums Service). We come to Houghtons most significant work last in this account. Houghton is known internationally for his work on the earliest writings about fungi by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Many things one reads about these writers from times like 300BC were first written in English by Houghton. It is clear from his lengthy account called "Notices of Fungi in Greek and Latin Authors"(1885) that he read these in the original Greek and Latin language. Again it is difficult to précis this mass of information but here we find some of the earliest writing about what a fungus is. These ancient writers were much concerned about which were the best fungi to eat.and on the other hand give graphic accounts of poisonous fungi. Names have of course changed but here we find the first use of "Agaricum" for example and the word Boletus. Here we find in amongst the poems and folklore some of the first suggestions of the medical uses of fungi. His account of these writings is still the standard work on these writings. In a similar vein, Houghton wrote papers about

specific "classical" writing e.g. The Unicorn of the Ancients(1869); The Rabbit as known to the Ancients(1869); Gleanings from the Natural History of the Ancients(1880); Fish Culture as Practised by the Ancients (1883); Birds of the Assyrian Monuments(1883).

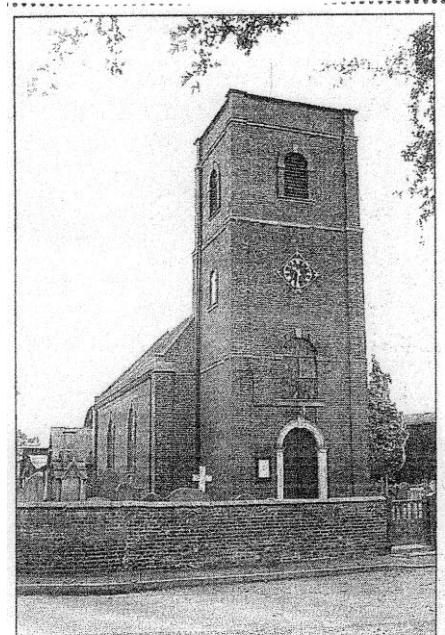
This intellectual giant beavering away in his Shropshire vicarage has left a legacy very important to our understanding of the history of mycology, not to mention his influence via Leighton and Phillips on our understanding of lichens and discomycete fungi.

T.F. Preece April 2007

The Rev. William Houghton – a picture to be found in H.E. Forrest's Fauna of Shropshire (1899) and kept in the Shropshire Archives, Castle Gates, Shrewsbury.



▲ The Grade I Listed Preston Trust Homes, built in the 1720s.



▲ The parish church at Preston