

The Friends of the Forfar Botanists  
Assisted by Alan Elliott, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh  
From [www.forfarbotanists.org](http://www.forfarbotanists.org)  
e-mail: [mail@forfarbotanists.org](mailto:mail@forfarbotanists.org)

## **George Don senior**

Date of Birth: 1764, Menmuir Date of Death: 1814, Forfar

### **Biography**

He was thought to have been born at Ireland Farm in the parish of Menmuir in Angus (known as Forfarshire at that time) around October 1764. George Don was a man of many talents, but it was in botany he excelled.

At an early age he became a clockmaker's apprentice in Dunblane. However, by the age of 15 he was sent to Dupplin Castle in Perthshire, the seat of the Earl of Kinnoull, to work in the gardens. It was in the surrounding area he made his first botanic discovery which was named after him – a moss, *Gymnostomum donnianum* – now known as *Seligeria donniana*.

He met a young woman, Caroline Stewart whilst on a botanical ramble from Dupplin. She was later to become his wife. He also began making regular plant hunting trips to the Highlands, exploring and increasing his knowledge of the Scottish flora. In 1780 or 1781, Don moved to England, travelling from place to place for around eight years including London, Oxford and Bristol, working as a short term gardener, before moving back to Scotland. He resumed his clockmaker's trade, this time in Glasgow but continued to spend his spare time out in the local countryside.

By 1797 Don had married Caroline and had obtained a plot of land in Forfar known as Dove or Doohillock. He built a house there and began his Botanic Garden which soon earned a reputation for its remarkable range, number and rarity of hardy plants.

In 1802, the position of Principal Gardener or Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh became vacant and George Don was recommended for the post despite having no formal qualifications or scientific training; proof of how highly regarded was his practical experience and Botanic Garden at Doohillock. Don was reluctant to leave Forfar, and the poor pay at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh was hardly an incentive but he was finally persuaded to go and took up his new duties in Edinburgh at the end of 1802. He left his beloved Doohillock in the capable hands of his father, Alexander.

Whilst in Edinburgh, Don spent much time with Dr Patrick Neill, discovering many new species of wild flowers and cryptogams (lichens, mosses and fungi). He became an Associate of the Linnaean Society and attended medical classes at the University, which, although he never qualified as a doctor, he did use on his return to Forfar. He also began to publish (thanks to Patrick Neill who was a publisher) producing the first volume of *Herbarium Britannicum*. He also contributed to some other works, including his 'Account of the Native Plants in the County of Forfar' in the Reverend James Headrick's 1813 'Agricultural Survey of the County of Angus'.

In 1805 Don became a member of the Natural History Society of Edinburgh, which had been founded by J E Smith in 1798, during a recruitment drive by Dr Patrick Neill, the society's secretary. Early in

1806 Don read two papers to the Natural History Society of Edinburgh. The first "On preparing and pressing Specimens" and the second entitled "Advantages of Botanical Knowledge". Later that year he left the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to return to Doohillock, possibly because of a difficult relationship with Regius Keeper Daniel Rutherford (Neill believed Don far exceeded Rutherford as a botanist – Rutherford was principally a chemist) but probably more likely because he missed the freedom to be plant hunting around 'Angus-shire' as he called it. In particular, his favourite location for plant collecting was Glen Clova, and he pioneered the exploration of that area.

Unfortunately, Don concentrated so much on his travels in the local hills and glens that he began to ignore the commercial side of his Botanic Garden – the nursery and market garden. With little or no income coming in, his family were dependent on neighbours for subsistence rations. Don still carried on with his excursions coming back from one of them in the autumn of 1813, with a severe cold. Necessity meant he had to carry on working and the cold worsened. Eventually he was bedridden with a suppurating throat, and after six weeks of agony, he died on 14 January 1814 at Doohillock.

George and Caroline had a family of 15 children but only six were alive at the time of his death.

Don left his family destitute and dependant on friends and Don's fellow botanists for charity. Of the 6 surviving children, a girl died within weeks of her father. The two elder sons, George Don Jr (1798-1856) and David Don (1799-1841) had both begun botanical careers by the time of their father's death and both eventually did very well. The three younger boys, Patrick Neill Don (1806-1876), James Edward Smith Don (1807-1861) and Charles Lyell Don also had careers in horticulture in England.

Don accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the natural history of Scotland and added a substantial amount to the collective botanical knowledge.

He was buried in an unmarked grave in Forfar's Old Parish Church graveyard. His funeral was probably the largest that Forfar had ever seen.

By the late 1800s there were calls for more recognition to be given to Don's achievements. These calls were led amongst others by John Knox, a Forfar Schoolmaster and Dr George Claridge Druce.

Druce was a remarkable figure who was a professional pharmacist and who had amassed a large, substantial herbarium which forms the basis of the Oxford University Herbarium. He was Mayor of Oxford, contributed greatly to the understanding of the flora of the UK, as well as restoring the professional reputation of George Don.

Funds were raised locally and from the botanical community in the UK and in 1910 a marble obelisk was erected at George Don's grave. At a grand opening ceremony it was unveiled by Dr Druce.

## **Publications**

Don, G. 1807. Observations on some of the Indigenous Grasses of Britain which seem deserving of Culture for Pasture or Hay. *Prize Essays and Transactions of the Highland Society of Scotland*, Volume 3:194-223

Don, G. 1813. Account of Native Plants in the county of Forfar, and the Animals found there. In Headricks, J. (1813). *A General View of the Agriculture in the County of Angus, or Forfarshire*. P. Neill. Edinburgh

Don, G. 1814. On the varieties of *Pinus sylvestris*, or Scots Fir [read 5<sup>th</sup> March 1811]. *Memoirs of the Caledonian Horticultural Society*. 1:121-127

### Associated Plants

George Don published three new species of plants in his *Herbarium Britannicum*. Due to its rarity his names have often been overlooked. The accepted name is highlighted in bold.

***Sagina maritima*** Don, *Herbarium Britannicum* 7: no. 155. (1806).

This name is the most widely associated taxa with George Don. There has been some debate about this species because of what was written in the more widely available *English Botany* 31: t.2195 (1810). Smith wrote that it occurred from "Nevis to the coast". However Don's fascicle predates that *English Botany* plate and does not mention the Ben Nevis locality.

*Raphanus maritimus* Don, *Herbarium Britannicum* 2: No. 25. (1805).

*Myosotis alpina* Don. [as *alpinus*], *Herbarium Britannicum*. 9: no. 205 (1812) [date on front plate is 1805 but issued late 1812- early 1813.] = ***Myosotis alpestris*** F.W.Schmidt.

There is some ambiguity surrounding the date of publication of fascicle 9 due to Don reusing and altering a title-page from fascicle 3 (1805). There are two specimens, n.213 *Astragalus campestris* and n. 216 *Carex salina*, collected in July 1812 and September 1812 respectively in this fascicle. Smith's *English Botany* volume 36 issued between March 1813 and March 1814 references Don's fascicle 9 specifically in the publication of *Myosotis rupicola* t.2559, which references Don's *Myosotis* alpine and fascicle 9. The plate of *Myosotis rupicola* is dated 1813 and therefore suggests that the date of publication for fascicle 9 is late 1812- early 1813.

### Botanical Commemoration

*Gymnostomum donnianum* Sm. = ***Seligeria donniana*** (Sm.) Mull.-Hal.

***Grimmia donniana*** Sm.

*Donia* G.Don & D.Don ex G.Don. in: *A General History of Dichlamydeous Plants* 2:467. (1832). "to the memory of the late Mr G Don whose numerous discoveries have so eminently enriched the flora of his native land". Unfortunately the genus *Donia* had been previously published, by Robert Brown to commemorate David Don, for a different set of plants therefore making it invalid. The species originally describes in *Donia* have been separated into a number of different genera within the Pea Family.

*Agropyron donianum* F.B.White = ***Elymus caninus*** var. ***donianus*** (F.B.White) Jaaska. (Don's Twitch)

## References and Further Reading

Druce, G.C. (1904). The Life and Works of George Don. Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. 12:54-290.

Duncan, U.K., (1966). 'A Bryophyte Flora of Angus.' *Transactions of the British Bryological Society* 5: 1-82.

Evans, W.E. (1934). George Don's Herbarium Britannicum. *Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh*. v.18 (n. 89) pp. 167-172.

Lawley, M. *A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists*. <http://rbg-web2.rbge.org.uk/bbs/Learning/Bryohistory/Bygone%20Bryologists/GEORGE%20DON.pdf> (last viewed July, 2013)

Luscombe, E., (2007). *George Don the Forfar botanist*. Pinkfoot Press, Brechin.

Neill, P. (1853) Biographical Note of the Late Mr George Don of Forfar. *Transactions of the Botanical Society of Edinburgh*. 4:117-118

RBGE, <http://stories.rbge.org.uk/archives/4218> (last viewed July, 2013)

RBGE library holdings relating to George Don,  
[http://www.rbge.org.uk/assets/files/science/Library%20-Archives/GB235GDS\\_GeorgeDonSr.pdf](http://www.rbge.org.uk/assets/files/science/Library%20-Archives/GB235GDS_GeorgeDonSr.pdf)  
(last viewed, July 2013)

Roger, J. G. (1986). 'George Don. 1764-1814.' *Scottish Naturalist* pp. 97-108.

Smith, W.W. (1934) George Don's Herbarium Britannicum. *Notes from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh*. 28: 167-172.

## Memorials

George Don Memorial, East and Old Churchyard, East High Street, Forfar.  
<http://www.forfarbotanists.org/donmemorial.html> (last viewed July 2013).