

## GIFFORD, ISABELLA (c. 1825 - 1891), botanist and algologist

**Name:** Isabella Gifford  
**Date of birth:** c. 1825  
**Date of death:** 1891  
**Parent:** George St John Gifford  
**Parent:** Isabella Gifford (née Christie)  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** botanist and algologist  
**Area of activity:** Science and Mathematics; Nature and Agriculture  
**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Isabella Gifford was born in south Wales (Swansea according to one source, Defynnog, Breconshire, according to other sources) around 1825. She was the daughter of George St John Gifford (died 1869), who served with Sir John Moore in the battle of A Coruña in 1809, and his wife Isabella (died 1891), who were married in 1824. Her mother, Isabella, was the daughter of the industrialist John Christie (1774-1858): originally from Scotland, Christie rose to wealth by trading indigo in India, using his means to buy the land of the Great Forest of Brecknock and build a network of tramways between Sennybridge and Cwmtawe. He demonstrated his importance locally by building the small mansion of Glanus in 1822; he was appointed sheriff of Brecon the same year. After his marriage, George Gifford worked for a time as a land agent for his father-in-law, but the family moved during Isabella's childhood, spending periods in France, Jersey, Melcombe Regis, Dorsetshire, and Falmouth in Cornwall. They were living in Falmouth when Isabella's only brother died in September 1844.

Isabella was educated by her mother and, although her mother had no scientific abilities or interests herself, it is possible that other members of her family contributed to the girl's development and successes in the field of botany and algology. In 1842, a small volume was published with the title *The Little Marine Botanist: or, guide to the collection and arranging of sea-weed*. Isabella's name has been associated with this volume, although it is not clear what was the exact nature of her contribution. It may be significant, however, that one of the publishers of the book was Darton & Sons, which had already published the work of the children's author Emily Taylor (1795-1872), who was related to Isabella through the marriage of Emily's brother, Edgar Taylor, to Ann Christie, a sister of Isabella's mother. Among the published works in question were examples centered on the natural world, such as *Letters to a child: on the subject of maritime discovery* (1820), a volume that would certainly have appealed to the young Isabella. Another relation of the Taylor family was the geologist and surveyor Richard Cowling Taylor (1789-1851); and through the marriage of Mary Christie, another sister of Isabella's mother, to the Unitarian and physician Thomas Southwood Smith (1788-1861), a prominent scientist became part of the family.

It was probably in 1848 that Isabella and her parents moved for the last time and made their permanent home at The Parks, Minehead, Somerset (she mentioned her first visit to Minehead beach in that year). This was also the year of the appearance of a second edition of her book, now bearing the title *The Marine Botanist: An introduction to algology*. The following year, a distinguished visitor recorded his visit to her parents at Minehead; the botanist and archaeologist Charles Cardale Babington (1808-1895) called to have tea with Captain and Mrs Gifford on the evening of 2 July 1849. When he returned there again the following summer, he also noted the name of 'Miss Gifford' in his diary. Isabella was clearly beginning to attract the attention of experts in the field which most interested her. The second edition of her book was praised in one review for its clear and skilled explanatory features. Furthermore, the reviewer foresaw that, although it did not present much information beyond the names of the species, its simplicity would 'attract new votaries to the study of our marine flora'. Isabella's work as an algologist developed with the publication of 'Observations on the Marine Flora of Somerset' in the journal of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society in 1852. In this article she showed how thoroughly she had come to know Minehead and the surrounding area - the beaches of Blue Anchor, Bossington, Warren, and Clevedon, together with the estuary of the river Hone - for the purposes of her work, and presented information about algae that she had found growing on these beaches together with some that had come ashore there in such good condition that it was quite certain that their origin could not be far from the coast of Somerset. She showed her scientific judgment clearly when discussing how she examined and assessed her specimens, using a microscope to notice the size of the cellules; dipping them in fresh water and noting the colour change; discussing the benefits of using a trawl to find further examples in deep water; and, of course, noting when and where else the same algae had been found, whether over the county border on Lynmouth beach in north Devon or as far away as Cádiz in Andalusia or even New Zealand. She stopped short of presenting a comprehensive list of all the algae that came to her attention, stating that her aim was to draw attention to the specimens that were constantly available in the area rather than those that were only seen occasionally. This attitude concurred with what was said about the second edition of her book in 1848, showing her desire to democratize the process of searching and make the discipline accessible to new algologists. When a third edition of *The*

*Marine Botanist* was published in 1853, considerably enlarged and containing colour illustrations of marine plants (by William Dickes (1815-1892), as in the case of the previous edition), Isabella noted in the preface how gratified she felt that 'credit has been awarded me "of having first led attention in a simple, popular, as well as strictly scientific manner, to an interesting branch of botany previously little studied"'. An important part of this popularization was the work's relationship with the publications of William Henry Harvey (1811-1866), *A manual of the British marine algæ* (1841) - 'to which it will be found, I trust, a useful introductory volume', said Isabella in a letter to the press - and his *Phycologia Britannica* (1846-51). Her personal relationship with Harvey was contemporary with the period of his publications: he noted her name among a list of individuals, both male and female, who had contributed specimens to his work in the second and third volumes of the *Phycologia Britannica*, showing the importance of networking for Isabella and her colleagues in the field. Another contact who acknowledged her help was the algologist and botanist Edward Morell Holmes (1843-1930), who remembered sending her algae to be named in exchange for mosses, likewise for naming.

In addition to her success as an algologist, Isabella also developed as a botanist. She remembered with satisfaction as she got older a scientific meeting at Dunster, Somerset, where a botanical paper of hers was read and her collection of west Somerset plants displayed. It is quite probable that this was the Seventh Annual Meeting of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society, held on 21-23 August 1855; the Society's proceedings recorded that a paper by Isabella had been presented, and published it under the title 'Notices of the Rare and most Remarkable Plants in the neighbourhoods of Dunster, Blue Anchor, Minehead, &c'. Isabella stated in the paper that she had noticed over five hundred and fifty flowering plants and ferns in the area; she regretted that no volume concerning them had been published, considering how extensive Somerset was and how varied its soil and the geographical directions it faced; and showed sensitivity to the plight of native species, which were 'dying, at the approach of cultivation, like the Red Indian disappearing from his hunting-grounds before the advancing footsteps of the white man'.

In 1890, Isabella Gifford became a member of the Selborne Society, one of a number of societies which she joined during her lifetime, including the Botanical Exchange Club until 1871 and the Thirsk Botanical Exchange Club. She would have liked to establish a branch of the Selborne Society in Somerset, she said, but was prevented by health conditions (rheumatism and neuralgia) which made her quite confined to her local area by this time. In December 1892, influenza struck her home; her mother died on Christmas Day and Isabella the following day, 26 December 1892. Both were buried in Minehead cemetery.

Through her patron and cousin, Herman Southwood Smith (1819-1897), Isabella's botanical collection was presented to the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society. Some items collected by her or which came through her hands were preserved in the collections of Margaret Gatty (née Scott, 1809-73) and Philip Brookes Mason (1842-1903), the former now at the University of St Andrews and the latter at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery.

## Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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## Further reading

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Wikipedia Article: [Isabella Gifford](#)

## Additional Links

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