

## THOMAS, HUGH HAMSHAW (1885 - 1962), palaeobotanist

**Name:** Hugh Hamshaw Thomas  
**Date of birth:** 1885  
**Date of death:** 1962  
**Spouse:** Edith Gertrude Thomas (née Torrance)  
**Parent:** Elizabeth Thomas (née Lloyd)  
**Parent:** William Hamshaw Thomas  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** palaeobotanist  
**Area of activity:** Nature and Agriculture; Science and Mathematics  
**Author:** Brynley Francis Roberts

Born 29 May 1885, in Wrexham, Denbighshire, 2nd son and 3rd child of William Hamshaw Thomas (men's outfitter) and his wife Elizabeth Lloyd. He was educated at Grove Park grammar school, Wrexham and went to Downing College, Cambridge, in 1904. Even at school he had acquired a serious interest in botany and fossil plants and he gained 1st class in pt. 1 of the Natural History tripos in 1906. He went on to take pt. 2 of the History tripos (2 class) in 1907 in preparation for the Civil Service. He took the Civil Service Entrance in 1908 but rejected the post offered him choosing to live as an independent scholar and researcher in Cambridge, supporting himself by teaching and coaching. He was appointed curator of the Botany School Museum 1909-23, and Sublector at Trinity College in 1912. He was elected a Fellow of Downing in 1914, and university lecturer in 1923. He served in the Royal Flying Corps in France and Egypt during World War I. He developed new techniques in aerial photography and also carried out research in the Aeronautical Dept. at Cambridge. He was twice mentioned in dispatches and was made an M.B.E. He also served in the R.A.F.V.R., engaged on aerial photographic interpretation, 1939-43.

He published his first papers on fossil plants in 1908 and continued his studies on the Jurassic flora of Yorkshire and plant morphology, much of it based on his own field collections rather than on museum collections. His most important and seminal paper, on the Caytoniales, appeared in 1925. This was a major contribution to one of the problems of fossil botany, the origin of flowering plants, though his ideas on morphology provoked a great deal of comment. His interests developed not only in the structure of fossil plants where his methodology of analysis was innovative, but also in the wider issues of evolutionary changes and the organization of the plant body so that his contribution to 'new' plant morphology is central. He became a historian of botanical ideas and played an important part in establishing the history of science option in the Natural History tripos. A modest, retiring and kindly man, he nevertheless achieved great distinction and in the Darwin-Wallace centenary (1958) he was judged to be among the 20 biologists of the world who had made the most outstanding contribution to knowledge of evolution and he was presented with a commemorative medal. He was Pres. of the Linnean Society, of the botanical section of the British Association, of the British Soc. for the History of Science. He was awarded the Linnean Soc. gold medal in 1906, Sc.D. Cambridge 1926, and elected F.R.S. 1934.

He married Edith Gertrude Torrance in 1923 and they had 1 son and 1 daughter. He died in Cambridge 30 June 1962.

### Author

Dr Brynley Francis Roberts

### Sources

*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

*Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 9 (1963)

*Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (New York 1976)

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Hugh Hamshaw Thomas](#)

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