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Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
Carnegie Mellon University
5th Floor, Hunt Library
4909 Frew Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213-3890
Telephone: 412-268-2434
Email: huntinst@andrew.cmu.edu
Web site: <http://www.huntbotanical.org>
Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/HuntBotanical/>
Online gift shop: <http://www.cafepress.com/huntbotanical>

Editor and layout	Scarlett T. Townsend
Editor, Emeritus	Robert W. Kiger
Book Reviews and Announcements Editor	Charlotte A. Tancin
Associate Editors	Donald W. Brown T. D. Jacobsen J. Dustin Williams
Photographer	Frank A. Reynolds

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F. W. Burbidge (1857–1905): What were his forenames?

E. Charles Nelson

Abstract

Civil records from Great Britain and Ireland have been checked to confirm the forenames of the English horticulturist, botanical artist and plant explorer F. W. Burbidge. For unexplained reasons his name altered between registration of his birth in 1849 and his enrolment for training at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden in Chiswick. His parents named him Thomas in 1849, yet by 1861 they were using Thomas William while after 1867 he used Frederick William Burbidge or the monogram F. W. B.

F. W. Burbidge (Figs. 1 and 2) was the author of an uncounted number of short notes and some longer articles about the whole gamut of horticultural topics, which were published by British periodicals, especially *The Garden* (see Nelson 1987), over four decades in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He also was an artist, publishing *The Art of Botanical Drawing* (Burbidge 1873) and creating illustrations for his own publications, including a monograph on *Narcissus* (Burbidge 1875). Trained as a gardener in the Royal Horticultural Society's Chiswick garden, he was a knowledgeable horticulturist who spent a quarter of a century as the respected curator of the College Botanic Gardens at Ballsbridge in Dublin.

Biographical information concerning “the amiable Burbridge [*sic*],” as he was dubbed by his contemporary, the Irish naturalist Robert Lloyd Praeger (1949, p. 36), can be contradictory and indeed incorrect, especially

about his family background. Most notably there is confusion about Burbidge's forenames (and so also his initials).

Some published biographical sources, such as his entry in the first supplement to the *Dictionary of National Biography* (Boulger 1912), gave his two forenames as Frederick William. Burbidge himself signed letters “F. W. Burbidge,” and his drawings (as numerous published examples show) invariably had the monogram “F W B.” However, a variety of other sources include a third forename, Thomas, or use the initials “F. W. T. B.,” without any explanation (for example, Brummitt and Powell 1992, p. 93).¹ To attempt to resolve the conundrum, I have examined official records, many now available online, from England and Ireland and here present the results of that survey.²

Registration of birth

In the United Kingdom registration of the birth of a child was not compulsory before 1875 although legislation passed in 1836 ordered the civil registration of births from 1 July 1837 following the establishment of the General Register Office. At first local registrars recorded births in their areas, and many were missed. In addition the Church of England's clergy recorded baptisms, marriages and burials in their respective parish registers.

In the Registrar's District of Leake in Loughborough Union of the Counties of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire, the

Tippitiwicheet Cottage, Hall Road, Outwell, Wisbech, PE14 8PE, Norfolk, United Kingdom

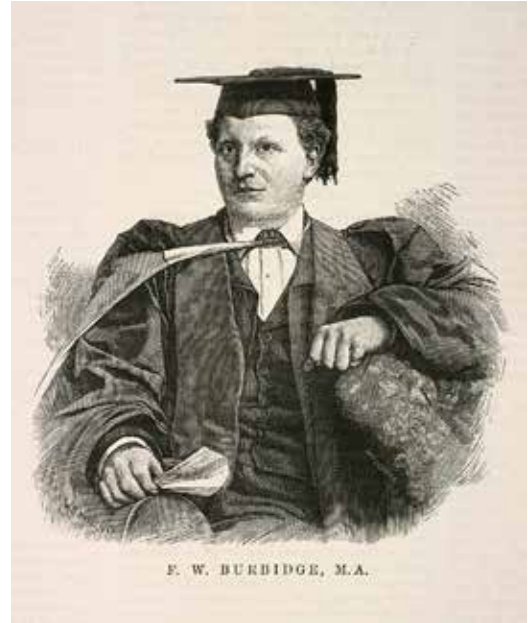


Figure 1. Thomas Frederick William Burbidge, photographed in Dublin on the occasion of the conferring on him of an honorary Master of Arts degree by the University of Dublin on 27 June 1889 in Trinity College. On that occasion The Public Orator “called attention to the benefits conferred on botanical science by Mr. Burbidge, by his travels in Borneo, and by his labours in elucidating the natural history of those classic flowers the Narcissi and the Hellebores” (Anonymous 1889a). Evidently this is one of a series of photographs taken on that occasion because the engraved published version (for example, Anonymous 1889b, p. 213) shows the sitter in more-or-less the same pose with gown and academic hood but wearing the mortar board (Figure 2) that here is held in his right hand. As a consequence of an infection contracted in Borneo, Burbidge had entirely lost his hair and afterwards always wore a wig (Jackson 1987). Images courtesy of Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation.

Registrar, B. W. Brown, recorded the birth of a boy, born on 21 March 1847 at Wymeswold, Leicestershire, the son of John Burbidge and Mary Burbidge (née Spencer). The boy’s given name was Thomas, and his birth was registered by his mother five days afterwards on 26 March 1847.³ Thomas Burbidge was almost certainly named after his paternal grandfather, Thomas Burbidge, a tailor,⁴ of Owston, Leicestershire.

Record of baptism

No record can be traced, especially not in Wymeswold,⁵ of the baptism of a male child of Mary and John Burbidge on or after 21 March 1847. Baptism was not compulsory but at the discretion of a baby’s parents, and it is impossible to determine why apparently no baptism took place.

Census of 1851

The first occasion, after his birth, on which the young Burbidge would have been recorded in civil records was in the 1851 census taken on the night of 30 March. He was then just over 4 years old and was recorded, with his parents, living at “Muzzel,” Wymeswold. The census enumerator recorded the boy’s name as Thomas and gave his father’s occupation as “Farmer of 28 Acres.”⁶

Census of 1861 and later

This census took place in England on 7 April 1861, 17 days after Thomas’s 14th birthday. The family no longer lived in Wymeswold but had moved to another Leicestershire village, Somerby, situated about 15 miles to the

southeast. On the census enumeration sheet, the enumerator recorded the family surname as “Burbage,” with “John Burbage,” “Head” of the family, aged 59 and then farming 20 acres. Living with him was Mary, his wife, and “Thomas William” described as “Farmers Son.” All the information about the ages and places of birth of the three family members tallies with the previous and the subsequent censuses, so it is certain that “Burbage” was an error for Burbidge.⁶ Of course there is no explanation of the boy’s additional name William in this record.

F. W. Burbidge

Within a few years the younger Burbidge moved from Leicestershire to the metropolis and started training as a gardener at the Royal Horticultural Society’s garden in Chiswick. As he is listed among the young men who sat the Royal Horticultural Society’s examinations in December 1867, when he gained a first-class certificate in floriculture and an extended second-class in fruit and vegetable culture (Anonymous 1868a), he is most likely to have started his training that year. He took the Society of Arts’s gardeners’ examination in April 1868, gaining a certificate in floriculture, as well as two second prizes, one from the Royal Horticultural Society and the other from the Society of Arts, both in floriculture (Anonymous 1868c). Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Royal Horticultural Society on 3 March 1868, the Revd Miles J. Berkeley “directed attention to some watercolour drawings of plants, made by Mr. F. W. Burbidge, one of the Chiswick students...” (Anonymous 1868b). In *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* on 1 August 1868, Burbidge’s sketch (Fig. 3) of a bunch of the prize-winning grape ‘Golden Champion’ was published with the accompanying comments that the “sketch was taken by Mr. F. W. Burbidge, one of the students in the gardens at Chiswick, and a highly promising horticultural draughtsman” (Anonymous 1868d, p. 816). This is probably the earliest published example

of his artwork. What is notable about these reports and the attribution of the sketch is that his initials were always given as F. W. When the results of the Royal Horticultural Society’s July 1868 examinations were published in September 1868, again he was listed as F. W. Burbidge (Anonymous 1868e).

Census of 1871 and some other records in 1870s

On 2 April 1871, when this census was conducted, 24-year-old William Burbidge—without any second name or any additional initials—was listed as once again living with, or perhaps just visiting, his father and mother at 93 Main Street, Somerby, Leicestershire.⁶ His father evidently had abandoned farming for his occupation was given as gardener. His son’s occupation was also “gardener,” which corroborates a report in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* on 24 June 1871 that the “enclosed garden” of Thomas Forman in Nottingham was then “under the management of Mr. F. W. Burbidge, formerly a student at Chiswick.” The terraced garden was “nicely compact” with several glasshouses containing “some nice and healthy quarter and half specimen plants of subjects rarely met with in these days” (R. D. 1871, pp. 810–811).

Another “official” record from the early 1870s exists for Burbidge in the form of the roll of prize-winners at the Society of Arts in 1874 (Anonymous 1874). Frederick W. Burbidge gained first prize in floriculture and first prize in fruit and vegetable culture although why he took the examination again, after a gap of six years, is not known. He was listed as “26 [years old], Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution,”⁷ and his occupation was given as “reporter.” By this time he had evidently returned to London and was employed writing for the periodical *The Garden*.

Marriage 1876

On 14 February 1876 in the parish church at Owston, his family’s home village, Mary

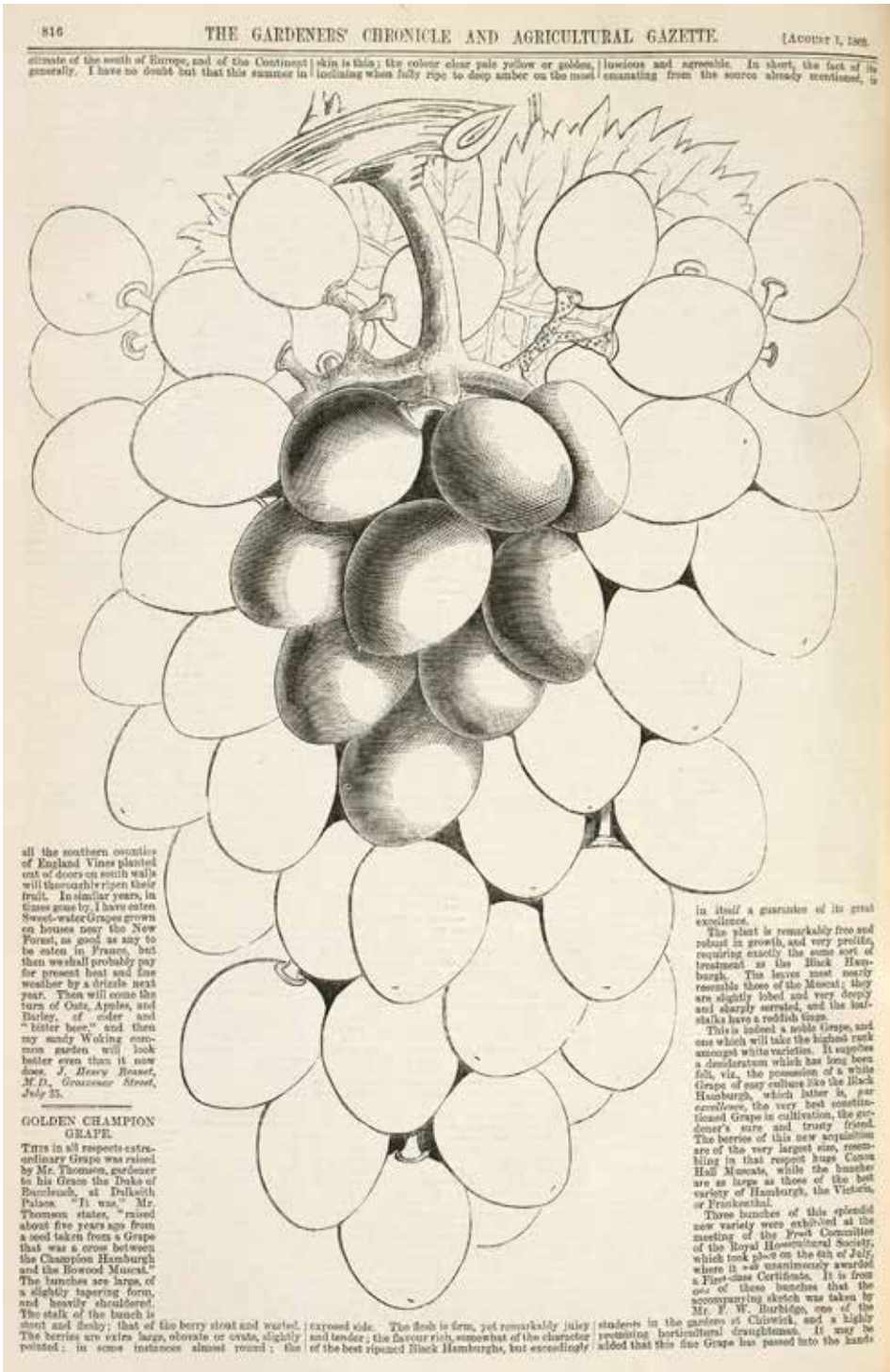


Figure 3. Grape (*Vitis vinifera*) 'Golden Champion'; unsigned engraving based on a sketch "taken by Mr. F. W. Burbidge" (see text above, lower right, final seven lines) on 6 July 1868 (Anonymous 1868d). Photography by Frank A. Reynolds, Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation.

Wade, 26 (born 1849), of Owston, daughter of Sarah and Thomas Wade, a grazier, married Frederick William Burbidge, 29, who then resided in St Paul’s Parish, Covent Garden, London, where the offices of *The Garden* were. “Frederick William Burbidge” was entered twice, clearly, in the register of marriages—it is strange that the names of the bride and groom appear to have been entered by the vicar of Owston, Alfred Carey, and the couple did not sign the register themselves.⁸

1879–1905

In 1879 the Burbidges moved to Dublin when he was appointed curator of the College Botanic Gardens. F. W. Burbidge died in Dublin on 24 December 1905, six months after the death of his wife. In the register of deaths for Dublin South, again his name was recorded as Frederick William Burbidge.⁹ He was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin, and an elaborate Celtic cross memorial marking his and his wife’s grave has the name “Frederick Willm. Burbidge” (Figs. 4 and 5).¹⁰

Discussion

From at least 1868 in publications Burbidge was invariably referred to by the initials F. W., for Frederick William. In the 1871 English census his name was recorded as William, without any additional name or initial, whereas when he married in 1876, his names were written in full in the marriage register as Frederick William.

Burbidge never composed an autobiography, so we have no explanation of his changing names. We can, however, using official records, state that very soon after he was born he was called Thomas and that that was his

Figures 4 and 5. *Right*, The Celtic cross marking the grave in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin, Ireland, of F. W. Burbidge and his wife Mary (née Wade), with the inscription on the plinth (© Yvonne Russell; reproduced by permission).



only name reported in the 1851 census. By 1861 Thomas William were the names his family apparently adopted for him, but by 1868 he had dropped Thomas and added Frederick, becoming F. W. Burbidge. The distinctive initials “F. W. B.” regularly appear attached to correspondence and notes in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* after April 1868, and on illustrations too, and while not every article may have been written by Burbidge, those so signed are most probably all his.

The question that now arises is how should he be listed: Frederick William Burbidge or Frederick William Thomas Burbidge? He never used the last variant, which appears to be a late-20th-century invention. Clearly, his own preferred form was Frederick William Burbidge, yet his name, from his birth until at least to about 1860, was simply Thomas Burbidge. Perhaps he should be listed as Thomas [Frederick William] Burbidge?

Notes

1. Online sources include, for example, *Who Was Who* (<https://doi.org/10.1093/ww/9780199540884.013.U184254>; accessed 28 November 2018).
2. Online genealogical databases used were Findmypast (<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>) and, less often, Ancestry (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk>).
3. Copy of register entry provided by the General Register Office, England: COL123746_2018-1-THOMAS_BURBIDGE.
4. This was his stated occupation on the marriage register entry of St Margaret’s Parish Church, Leicester, on 20 April 1844 recording the marriage of his son John Burbidge, “Farmer & Grazier,” and Mary Spencer, parents of Thomas (otherwise F. W.) Burbidge.
5. Wymeswold Parish registers, vol. 8, Baptisms, 1845–1909 (available at <http://www.hoap.co.uk>).
6. Census records available from Findmypast (<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>).
7. Now Birkbeck College, part of the University of London. Burbidge paid the enrolment fee of 6 shillings on 3 June 1874. His address was given as “[The] Garden Office, 37 Southampton St”. My thanks to Emma Illingworth, Subject Librarian for Science (Biological, Earth & Planetary, Psychological), Birkbeck Library.
8. Certified copy of an entry of marriage provided by the General Register Office, England, 22 November 2018: MXH 502014.
9. https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1905/05580/4567303.pdf (accessed 28 November 2018).
10. Irish Genealogy Projects URL <http://www.igp-web.com/IGPArchives/ire/dublin/photos/tombstones/mt-jerome-53/target116.html> and [/target117.html](http://www.igp-web.com/IGPArchives/ire/dublin/photos/tombstones/mt-jerome-53/target117.html) (accessed 28 November 2018).

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