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A gift from Mauritius

William Curtis, George Clark and the Dodo

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William Curtis founded the Curtis Museum, Alton, Hampshire in 1837; it became a renowned meeting place for some of the most eminent scientists of the day. One of Curtis's close friends was George Clark, who discovered the first dodo subfossil bones on Mauritius. Clark sent several consignments of bones to England, of which some were acquired by Richard Owen for the British Museum and others by Alfred Newton at Cambridge, who sold them at auction on behalf of Clark. Largely overlooked is the fact that Clark, due to his friendship, had hand-picked specimens of exceptional quality for Curtis and his museum. Here we provide details about William Curtis and his museum, the history of Clark and his family, the friendship of Clark to Mauritius in the first place, and how the bones eventually came into the possession of William Curtis.

WILLIAM Curtis (1803-1881), a geologist and natural historian, founded the Curtis Museum at Alton, Hampshire in 1837; he collected many of the museum specimens locally, but also received material from elsewhere in the UK and abroad.¹ The museum became a favoured meeting place for some renowned scientists, including the ornithologist John Gould (1804-1881) and the zoologist Thomas Bell (1792-1880). A close family friend was George Clark (1807–1873) (Fig. 1), who had a life-long interest in natural history and who, when on Mauritius, spent decades searching for fossil remains of the dodo Raphus cucullatus (L., 1758) (formerly Didus ineptus), a giant flightless pigeon endemic to the island. In September 1865 along with a railway engineer, Harry Higginson, Clark discovered fossil remains at the Mare aux Songes marsh, southwest Mauritius,² which resulted in the first detailed anatomical studies of the dodo.³ Prior to the discovery, only a skull and foot in Oxford, a skull in Denmark, a beak in Prague and another foot (now lost) in London were known to exist.⁴ Clark sold 100 bones for £100 to the comparative anatomist, Richard Owen (1804-1892), then superintendent at the British Museum, who not only reconstructed from them the first dodo skeleton but also wrote a monograph describing the post-cranial bones.5

Clark's name has become synonymous with the Mare aux Songes, and almost all dodo bones held

in collections around the world originated from this one locality.⁶ Much has been written about his dodo exploits, but much less is known about the early career of George Clark and his family and why he was on Mauritius in the first place. Here we present details about Clark's life before his dodo discoveries, along with unpublished reminiscences and correspondence between William Curtis and his wife, Jane Elizabeth, concerning George Clark and his brother, Samuel. Curtis was a close friend of Clark, and we speculate on why Clark hand-picked some of the choicest Mare aux Songes dodo remains known and sent them to Curtis as a gift, despite supposedly selling the best preserved bones to Richard Owen.7 Clark sent consignments of dodo bones to Owen in London via the postal service (by steamship),⁸ and here we provide evidence of how the dodo bones may have reached William Curtis via Clark's connection with the Curtis family.

William Curtis

William Curtis (Fig. 2) was born into a family of doctors and Quakers.⁹ His father was Jane Austen's physician, and his father's cousin, another William Curtis (1746–1799), was a botanist, author of *Flora Londinensis*¹⁰ and founder of the *Botanical Magazine*.¹¹ Curtis had a keen interest in the natural sciences,



Fig. 1. George Clark (1807–1873). From Hume et al (2009), with permission.

including geology, and was a founder member of both the Palaeontographical Society in 1847¹² – the oldest society devoted to the advancement of palaeontological research – and the Geologists' Association in 1858.¹³ His main collecting area was in the neighbourhood of Alton, especially in pits and quarries, and from these discoveries, Curtis put together a systematic collection of local fossils;¹⁴ his numerous contacts in the scientific world contributed specimens from elsewhere. For example, following a soirée at their home in December 1850, his son described the dining room as 'covered with drawers containing Father's best specimens of Geology and minerals'.¹⁵

The Curtis Museum

The Curtis Museum has its origins in the Alton Mechanics Institute (originally called the Alton Mechanics and Apprentices Library) (Fig. 3), founded in 1837 by William Curtis.¹⁶ Lectures were a regular feature at the rooms, mainly presented by William's younger brother, the botanist and ornithologist John Wright Curtis (1814–1864), and over the years the library and the geological and zoological



Fig. 2. William Curtis (1803–1881). Library of Hampshire Cultural Trust, P2011.1.495 DPAAVP99.

collections continued to grow. These included items from William's personal collection and from his many contacts in the natural science world, who contributed objects and specimens from local sources and from further afield.¹⁷ In 1855 the collections were moved into larger premises, with a reading room and library on the ground floor and the first floor devoted to the museum and its collections. The Mechanics Institute opened in its current premises in 1880, but when William Curtis died, it was renamed in his honour.¹⁸ The Alton Urban District Council became responsible for the museum from 1920 and following the 1944 Education Act, it passed to the Hampshire County Council which still owns the building, managed today by the Hampshire Cultural Trust.¹⁹

William Curtis in the local context

The Curtis family appears to have been at the centre of a natural science hub, attracting scientists from all over the country. These included John Gould, the ornithologist and bird artist who first reported the differences among the distinct island populations of



Fig. 3. Alton Mechanics Institute building in 1882. The Institute had been re-named in honour of Cortis at his death the previous year. Library of Hampshire Cultural Trust P2011.1.272 DPAAVP74.

Darwin's Galapagos finches and mockingbirds, who appears to have been a personal friend.²⁰ William's wife, Jane Elizabeth Curtis (formerly Jane Elizabeth Heath, see below) wrote in 1845: 'A few days after his [William Curtis] third talk Mr Gould of London called'. Another letter written by Jane on the 10 June, 1845 described a journey to London with William: '... to Mr Gould's - saw his sweet children, at least four from out of the six, looked over some splendid Australian birds skins, a collection of birds' eggs etc. Left William to dine there²¹ Jane later wrote: 'Then came the British Association [for the Advancement of Science, 1846?] at Southampton to which my dear William went for three or four days bringing back Mr Gould with him'. Jane went on to write on another occasion: 'He [William] recovered in time to enjoy a visit from his old friend John Gould who was accompanied by a Mr Franklin'. Gould even provided an original pencil sketch of an unidentified passerine for the Curtis Family scrapbook and artwork album,²² which is here reproduced for the first time (Fig. 4).

Another eminent zoologist who took an interest in the Museum was Thomas Bell, who later moved to Selborne. Bell identified the reptiles and crustaceans collected by Darwin in the Galapagos.²³ The house into which he moved at Selborne formerly had been owned by Gilbert White, author of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*,²⁴ which was later edited by Bell and included 'The Geology of Selborne' by William Curtis.²⁵ Bell is known to have corresponded with George Clark before the discovery of the dodo.²⁶ William Curtis's son, another William (known as 'the Curator'), recalled: 'Prof Bell presented several specimens of natural history to the Alton Museum and no doubt induced others to do the same. It was probably due to his influence that some exhibits were contributed by the Linnaean Society of London.'²⁷

Yet another prominent figure with a connection to the Curtis Museum was George Sclater-Booth, MP who presided at the opening of the New Assembly Room in Alton on 19 October 1880. He was the older brother of Philip Sclater, a founder and first editor of *The Ibis* ornithological journal in 1859,²⁸ which published Clark's article on the discovery of the dodo bones.²⁹ Sclater was also secretary of the Zoological Society of London, then based in Hanover Square and an important meeting place for naturalists.³⁰

William Curtis and Samuel Clark

On 27 May 1830 William married Jane Elizabeth Heath, eldest daughter of the Quaker Thomas Heath, a brewer, banker and former mayor of Andover.³¹ In 1849 Jane's sister, Ellen (1817–1857), married the Revd Samuel Clark (1810–1875) (Fig. 5), an educationalist, who in turn was the brother of George Clark. Samuel came from a family of ten children, all born to Joseph Clark (1768–1850) and Fanny



Fig. 4. Original sketch of an unidentified passerine by John Gould. In Curtis (1857): William Curtis Family Scrap Book and original artwork 23 September 1857. Library of Hampshire Cultural Trust: Hampshire, ACM1962.400.

(dates unknown).³² Other brothers were Joseph, a magistrate at Southampton, and Edward, a geologist. William Curtis and Samuel Clark had met between 1828 and 1830: 'My father, in planning to make these [Mechanics Institute and Philosophic Society] institutions really useful by a course of practical lectures, became acquainted with Samuel Clark, a young Quaker, between eighteen and twenty years of age, of great promise, and of very remarkable mental powers'.³³ They may have met through their common religious background, since both came from Quaker families and attended the Temple Church together on at least one occasion: 'On the 12th Samuel Clark breakfasted with us and accompanied us with Mrs. Leathley to the Temple Church'.³⁴ It is equally possible that they may have met or strengthened their life-long friendship through their association with their local mechanics' institute and literary and philosophical societies - William at Alton and Samuel at Southampton. Samuel reports a visit to Alton in 1834: 'Third day I went to Alton and returned yesterday. My journey was partly business, partly pleasure, and partly to get rid of the fag end of Whooping Cough'.³⁵

Correspondence between William and his wife Jane, shows that the marriage of Samuel and Ellen had been anticipated by them: 'Mr Clark called upon me [William] yesterday and did not say anything about going to be married'. In September 1848, following a visit by Samuel, Jane wrote 'S.C. left, has proposed to dear Ellen. How I hope that she will accept him. He is an old and long time friend of ours'.³⁶ Curtis's son, William, was later able to record: 'It was during my stay with Aunt Ellen, that the Revd Samuel Clark, my Father's great friend, came to see her and made her an offer of marriage and was accepted'.³⁷ Curtis's son later went to live with his 'Uncle Samuel and Aunt Ellen' for a year at their Battersea home in order to attend lectures at the Training College for National Schoolmasters of which the Revd Clark was the principal. William returned to live with them when he was training as a medical student. The favour was returned when Samuel's son, Willy, stayed at Alton with his tutor to undertake lessons with Arthur, William's youngest son.³⁸

William Curtis and the Clark brothers

George Clark was also a good friend of William Curtis and, with another brother, Edward, visited the Curtis family in Alton on several occasions. The relationship between William and the Clark brothers dated back to the 1830s, but may have started much earlier. A meeting between the William and George was recounted in a letter, dated 1835, from William to his wife, Jane:

Alton 8th month 2dy [sic] 1835

When I got home I found a note from Mr Levy [John Levy, a banker: John Levy & Co., Alton] inviting me to a friendly



Fig. 5. Samuel Clark (1810–1875). Library of Hampshire Cultural Trust: Hampshire.

cup of tea, so I went and found Mr Burnett and a visitor of his and Mr George Clark the Curate there. We had a very pleasant evening, conversation being kept up on scientific and literary subjects with considerable spirit till past 11.³⁹

A letter dated August 1835, from William to Jane, who was staying then with family members in Andover, mentions:

...in the evening had the company of Mr Clark and his brother, who is a geologist I believe.⁴⁰

and

Yesterday the Messrs Clark went on a trip to Hartley and Selborne; today they are gone to Stoner Hill and then Lytton. Tomorrow if possible I shall take Mr Geologist Clark to Bentley in order to see the Gault.⁴¹

Mr Geologist Clark was Edward Clark. 'Edward seems to have been a geologist which in itself was

enough to endear him to William though they seldom met'.⁴² Curtis further wrote:

Well, on the 4th I took my expected trip into the Holt [Alice Holt Forest] with Mr Geologist Clark, Mr Edward Clark, No 5 Jeffrey's Square, St Mary Axe – he is a Turkey Merchant, an MGS and a funny fellow.⁴³

A Turkey Merchant was a member of the Levant Company which regulated trade between England and the Levant.⁴⁴ William Curtis's son wrote of George Clark:

George was another brother whose chief claim to distinction rests on his discovery of the remains of the extinct dodo on the Island of Mauritius in 1865. He wrote an account of this on January 6th 1866 which appeared in 'The Ibis' of the following April. In this he said he had sent 'bone of every kind that I have found' to Prof Owen and Mr Alfred Newton. These amounted to an almost complete skeleton of the bird and may be seen at the British Museum (Natural History) Cromwell Road. He also sent with a reprint of this article inscribed 'W Curtis Esq from his friend GC' 'a fairly representative collection of bones which is in the museum at Alton'.⁴⁵

As attested by the correspondence with William, George had a life-long interest in natural history, which probably triggered his interest with the dodo during his time on Mauritius.

George Clark (1807-1873)

George Clark, the elder brother of Samuel, was born in 1807 in England and married Jane Pitt (d.1859).⁴⁶ They had seven children, some of whom have proved impossible to trace. The first three were all boys: Wilfred, born in 1830 (date of death unknown), who married Marie-Prosper Gotelier; John (dates unknown), who married Lucie Demay; no details are known of the third, except that he married a Sarah-Elisabeth, Margaret Louisa or Ellen-Jane.⁴⁷ The boys were all born before Clark went to the Seychelles and Mauritius, and appear to have remained behind in England, for Clark took only one daughter with him. Why this was so is a complete mystery. Clark was living in Guernsey, Channel Islands in 1834, as his first daughter and fourth child, Jane-Francès, was born there in that year.48

In June 1836, George, his wife Jane and daughter Jane-Francès left for Mauritius under the auspices of the Lady Mico Charity, where George and Jane were to work as missionary teachers.⁴⁹ The charity had been

founded by Lady Jane Mico, who in 1666 had inherited most of her husband's fortune after his death.⁵⁰ Being a noted philanthropist, Lady Mico used her wealth to house poor widows in London and to set up training institutions in a number of British colonies.⁵¹ Following the work of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, in 1835 four teacher-training institutions and hundreds of elementary schools were established in the British Colonies in the West Indies, Mauritius and Seychelles by the Lady Mico Charity.⁵² Buxton managed to direct the resources of the charity to the education of the children of the ex-slaves in the British colonies, where slavery was in the process of being abolished.⁵³ By 1838 under the leadership of its Agent, the Revd Jean Lebrun, the Lady Mico Charity had opened nine schools across Mauritius, established in hired or rentfree houses, and where 660 pupils were being taught; the Seychelles opened its first free school in 1839.54

George Clark's brother Samuel confirmed the departure of George and Jane in June 1836, and it appears to have been upsetting for Samuel to see his brother leave for Mauritius:

6th month, 4th. — Fourth day I returned from London, where my sojourn has been one of deep and painful interest in several ways. This day two weeks I took leave of George, about to sail to Mauritius with his wife and child and his friend P., with his wife and child. May God preserve them and render them useful in the work of love to which He has sent them. It is no trifle to take leave of a brother under such circumstances, and it pressed heavily on my heart, but the feeling was not grief.⁵⁵

Clark and his family must have gone almost directly to the Seychelles in 1836, as the islands were governed via Mauritius, the mother colony since the British takeover from the French in 1810.56 Their second daughter, Mary-Rebecca, was born there on 10 November 1836.57 The Clarks later returned to Mauritius, but in 1838 the Revd Lebrun got permission for George and Jane to return to the Seychelles to open a school for emancipated slaves and their children.58 In the same year, a new Civil Commissioner, Charles Mylius, was appointed to the Seychelles.⁵⁹ Mylius's son, Captain Frederick-James Mylius (1838–1899), who was going to feature so prominently in the sale of the first dodo bones to Richard Owen (see below),⁶⁰ later married Clark's eldest daughter, Jane-Francès on 29 January 1863 at Mahébourg Christchurch, Mauritius.⁶¹

In April 1839 George Clark and Jane opened under the auspices of the Lady Mico Charity on Mahé the first free school for children of ex-slaves ever to be established in the Seychelles, where they initially gave lessons under a tree.⁶² They later hired a house in La Rosière and had 100 pupils: Commissioner Mylius gave full support to the Clarks, and George also gave services on Sundays.⁶³ In 1842, George sent a special gift to Curtis:

It was a great delight to us when my Father received a large live Tortoise from his old Friend, George Clark, living in the Seychelles Islands. My father fenced off a piece of ground at the top of our garden, with a light fence & placed him in it, but when we came down in the morning the Tortoise was loose in the garden.⁶⁴

George Clark appears also to have met Samuel Clark in Jersey, Channel Islands in the same year, as Samuel wrote: 'Aug 14th 1842 – saw George off from Jersey',⁶⁵ suggesting that George was returning to the UK on a visit, and he may well personally have brought the tortoise with him to Jersey. The Clarks must also periodically have been staying on Mauritius – perhaps due to better facilities there for childbirth, as George and Jane continued having children. In 1842, Edith Elisabeth (Bessie) was born at Mahébourg, followed by F[rancès?] Judith in 1843.⁶⁶

On 5 July 1843, the Revd Georges Delafontaine was sent to the Seychelles under the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and immediately took over all duties of the Lady Mico Charity.⁶⁷ This resulted in the closure of the free schools set up by the Clarks and Mylius, despite their successful preaching and educational enterprises,⁶⁸ so George Clark offered his services to Delafontaine. However, it appears that Delafontaine was of a suspicious nature and was inclined to believe unfounded rumours that had been spread about Clark, so the offer was declined.⁶⁹ As a parliamentary grant for Creole education was ending in 1847, the Clarks were offered a permanent placement on Mauritius and departed in early 1844.⁷⁰

Prior to gaining a permanent teaching position, George travelled in an open carriage to meet his Mauritian congregations of free Creoles and to preach to them; he and Jane also regularly entertained visiting dignitaries at their home.⁷¹ But it was far from a peaceful time on Mauritius for missionaries: the emancipation of slaves ordered by the British government took effect on 1 February 1835, but it was not until 1 February 1839 that the slaves really considered themselves free; moreover, despite considerable awards of compensation, the majority of land- and slave-owners fiercely opposed the order.⁷² As the church and missionaries endorsed the movement, they were often aggressively attacked – even inside the churches.⁷³

Now permanently settled on Mauritius, George and Jane had their final child Louis-Ellen-Pitt, born 26 July 1849.74 Some two years later, George obtained a teaching placement on 11 May 1851 at Mahébourg south-east Mauritius.75 Government School, F[rancès?] Judith, at just fifteen, was appointed as an assistant mistress on 27 September 1858 at the same school, while Edith Elisabeth (Bessie) was appointed mistress on 7 September 1859, aged seventeen.⁷⁶ George's wife Jane died in 1859, perhaps prompting the daughter's appointment at such a young age. Bessie was sent in 1889 by the Church of England to Victoria, Seychelles, as headmistress of St Paul's Girls' School, where she also taught English; like her parents some fifty years previously, she raised the educational standards substantially.77

Bessie returned to England, and by 14 June 1896 was living in London, as was her sister Jane-Francès.78 Presumably while still in London, Bessie had a letter published in the Westminster Gazette of 16 January 1902 summarizing her father's contributions to science.⁷⁹ She later retired to Hastings on the south coast. On 28 April 1921, she wrote to Thomas Parkin, president of the Hastings and St Leonards Natural History Society, who lived nearby. Times were financially hard for Bessie, so Parkin organized the sale at the Stevens Auction Rooms of dodo bones in her possession; these were specimens personally collected by her father at the Mare aux Songes. Three of them (coracoid and two tarsometatarsi) were purchased by Parkin and are now in the possession of Ralfe Whistler,⁸⁰ whose father Hugh Whistler, a noted ornithologist, was a friend of Parkin.⁸¹ Bessie died on 14 November 1923, aged eighty-one years.82

George Clark noted that he had barely time to study science since his arrival on Mauritius, but for the following decade and a half he was finally able to examine the island and its fauna and flora in his spare time.⁸³ Clark never became a member of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius, preferring to work on his own.⁸⁴ In 1859, he published the most comprehensive description of the island to date in *A Ramble around Mauritius*, which included a section on the fauna.⁸⁵ Most of the endemic species were already extinct, but Clark described a captive Lesser Fruit Bat *Pteropus subniger* housed in the menagerie of local fauna which he maintained – the last unequivocal record of a species also now extinct.⁸⁶ Later he further contributed to the study of the geology of the island.⁸⁷

Clark's enthusiasm for natural history continued, alongside his successful career as a teacher, but it was his interest in finding fossils, especially those of the dodo, that was really going to make his name.

Mare aux Songes

By 1866, George Clark had been resident on the island for most of the previous thirty years; he had spent much of this time searching for fossils, largely without success.⁸⁸ In 1860 Dr Philip Ayres (1813–1863), a physician, scientist and active member of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius,⁸⁹ asked Clark to join him in a search for bones at Fort Frederik Hendrick near Mahébourg, the site of first Dutch settlement on the island.⁹⁰ Ayres had already discovered what he thought was a dodo bone in a cave near Black River,⁹¹ and considered the fort ruins a potential fossil locality. Clark was not convinced and concentrated his efforts in the areas around Mahébourg, having already searched for them elsewhere on the island.92 He believed the best chance of success lay in the mass of alluvium deposits, especially a marshy delta formed by three rivers running into the sea (Mare aux Songes),⁹³ close to the present-day airport.

Around 1860–62, the earliest railway lines were being constructed in Mauritius, with the first operational line, the Northern, opening in 1864;⁹⁴ the second line, the Midland, opened in 1865.⁹⁵ Clark took advantage of the construction of railway embankments and cuttings, and searched along the excavations between Curepipe and Mahébourg.⁹⁶ It was probably during this time that he met the civil engineer Harry Higginson, who arrived in Mauritius in 1862 to work on the railway project.⁹⁷

Discovery of the first fossil dodo bones

The publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures* in *Wonderland* in 1865 brought worldwide recognition to the dodo and it coincided with the discovery by Higginson and Clark of subfossil dodo bones at the Mare aux Songes marsh.⁹⁸ Clark subsequently sold 100 bones to Richard Owen for £100 – an extremely generous reward (Clark's salary in 1865 was £290 *per annum*).⁹⁹ Clark sent the first consignment of bones to Owen in September 1865. Alfred Newton of the University Museum of Zoology in Cambridge was also expecting a shipment of bones; he anticipated selling excess material on Clark's behalf at the Stevens Auction House the following year.¹⁰⁰ Owen was tipped-off about this consignment by Frederick-James Mylius, Clark's aforementioned son-in-law, and intercepted the bones: he arranged a new deal with Clark via Mylius and promptly retained all of the material, including further shipments. Newton was furious - in part, perhaps, because of the loss of financial gain¹⁰¹ - but he was unable to retaliate since Owen, who had written a testimonial in Alfred's favour, blatantly blackmailed him from taking further action by threatening his application in 1866 to become first Professor of Comparative Anatomy at Cambridge.¹⁰² Newton had to relinquish his claim, leaving Owen to publish his first monograph on the dodo in October of that year.¹⁰³

Gift of dodo bones

Despite Clark supplying a large number of dodo bones to Owen, he appears to have retained a collection for himself. At some point in 1866 or later, George sent a batch to William Curtis via his brother Samuel, which included a signed reprint of his April 1866 *Ibis* article (Fig. 6).¹⁰⁴ The family reminiscences make no mention of the delivery of the dodo bones, but they may have been sent shortly after their discovery and after the death of Thomas Curtis (1839–1865), William's son, a doctor on board the doomed RMS *Athens*, which in September 1864 left Southampton with a two-year contract to carry the mail between Cape Town and Mauritius.¹⁰⁵ In a letter to his aunt dated 3 April 1865, Thomas wrote 'Last time I spent a very pleasant week at Mahibourg [*sic*] at Mr George Clarkes [*sic*], uncle Samuel's brothers – he's a very nice man & has two very pleasant daughters'.¹⁰⁶ Thomas was drowned on 19 May the following year when the *Athens* was wrecked in a storm off Table Bay.¹⁰⁷

As Samuel Clark was the recipient of the dodo bones from his brother, it is also possible that he held on to them until a more appropriate time came to pass them to William Curtis - possibly after April 1866 when George Clark's Ibis article was published. William would have recognized the importance of the bones, but following the death of his son he was grief-stricken. 'The dear Father was so cut up with Toms [sic] loss, that he was unable to attend to his work as usual, and slacked off a good deal - so that my time was fully occupied with the practise [sic]'.¹⁰⁸ It took until 1867 before his grief eased: 'The cloud of depression which for long hung over papa had gradually lessened, and with the year 1867 came an altogether livelier tone'.¹⁰⁹ The importance of the dodo material was later acknowledged in a pamphlet describing the contents of the Curtis Museum dated 1889: 'Also a very valuable Collection of Bones of extinct birds, the Moa of New Zealand, and Dodo of Mauritius'.¹¹⁰

From his fier

Fig. 6. George Clark's signed copy to William Curtis of the (1866) *Ibis* article describing his discovery of dodo bones on Mauritius. Library of Hampshire Cultural Trust: Hampshire.

The pick of the bunch

It has been widely presumed that Richard Owen and Alfred Newton got the pick of the best post-cranial dodo material, but our examination of the Curtis Museum collection contradicts this assumption. George Clark was actively excavating at the Mare aux Songes from September until November 1865, but when the owner Gaston de Bissy accidentally shot himself on 27 October, the new owner forbade Clark further access from the following December.¹¹¹ Clark had certainly amassed a large number of dodo bones, some of which he retained for himself, since in April 1866 he offered further specimens to Richard Owen and the British Museum.¹¹² Clark sent consignments of dodo bones to London, but almost all¹¹³ exhibit external damage due to mechanical or biological abrasion.¹¹⁴ This includes surface damage to the proximal and distal ends of post-cranial long bones, and loss of distal extremities of the sternum and pelvis.¹¹⁵ The Curtis collection, by contrast, contains bones that are almost without abrasion of any kind (Fig. 7): most notable is a pair of undamaged scapulae, which are fragile bones that rarely retain the thin, blade-like distal end (Fig. 8). George Clark had supposedly selected the best dodo material for Owen and Newton, but it seems as though Clark held on to the best-preserved material and sent Curtis the choicest specimens at no charge, purely on account of their friendship.

Why the Curtis dodo collection has been overlooked since that time is probably due to the bones not being compared with other dodo material, together with the assumption that a small museum would not have received the best material. The collection was mentioned in a publication in 2015, but the bones themselves were not examined on that occasion.¹¹⁶

Discussion

Despite hosting the scientific community in its nineteenth-century heyday, William Curtis and the Curtis Museum were to fall somewhat into obscurity. However, it was George Clark more than anyone else, who maintained an interest in natural history and provided an important insight into the natural environment of Mauritius at that time.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Clark's success as a teacher, along with the support of his wife, Jane, was unprecedented, both on the Seychelles and on Mauritius. Commissioner Mylius's last report, before leaving the Seychelles in April 1850, gave Clark and his wife full credit for the work they had done there: I must be allowed the duty, as well as satisfaction to avail myself of this opportunity to place on record my best acknowledgements for the able assistance I received at the hands of Mr and Mrs George Clarke [sic]¹³³ of the Mico Charity Society, as well as for the zeal and ardent devotion displayed by them in the propagation of the Gospel in those parts. The foundations of which at Mahé they may proudly consider themselves architects. When Mr Delafontaine reached these forlorn shores he found a place of worship ready to receive him with a congregation of 150 to 200 persons. Eighty children at least instructed in the first rudiments of learning, all of them with a fair religious foundation, and it was gratifying to one's feelings, as it was remarkable, the perfect manner in which the good and excellent Mrs Clarke [sic] had trained the children in psalm-singing, so that when the Revd. Mr Delafontaine arrived here he did not land in an isolated or savage country, but found the way well paved for him, and the most difficult part in the matter fairly conquered by the united efforts and praiseworthy zeal of Mr and Mrs Clarke [sic] to whom every credit must be given, and my best thanks are due for the manner in which they laboured in the great and good cause during their stay at Mahé "Palmam qui meruit ferat.¹¹⁸

Clark was considered on Mauritius to be 'one of the most able and successful teachers in the island'¹¹⁹ and was proposed as honorary member of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences, Mauritius on 13 April 1866.¹²⁰ By the late 1860s, it seems that Clark's health was deteriorating, so he returned to England in 1869 for medical treatment.¹²¹ Before departure, he published an expanded account of his 1866 paper with novel suggestions about dodo ecology,¹²² but this was the last time he wrote on the subject. Clark corresponded for the final time with Richard Owen in April 1866 and with Alfred Newton in May 1870;¹²³ he returned to Mauritius in 1871, retiring as a teacher the following year.¹²⁴ He died in Mahébourg in 1873, aged sixty-five.¹²⁵ On his tombstone in the western cemetery in Mahébourg is inscribed:

Sacred to the beloved memory of Jane PITT wife of George CLARK who died Aug. 17th 1859 and of GEORGE CLARK who departed this life Feb. 6th 1873. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. For they rest from their labours And their works do follow them.¹²⁶

What is particularly special about Clark's legacy is the quality of the dodo fossil material (Figs 7–8). One of us (JPH) has studied hundreds of Mare aux Songes dodo bones in institutions around the world, but none are of the quality sent by Clark to Curtis. Even the specimens sold to Owen are not comparable. The dodo specimens were obviously carefully selected by Clark, and the reason for it can only be due to the special friendship between himself and William Curtis. Despite living

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Fig. 7. Selection of dodo bones hand-picked by George Clark and sent to William Curtis. From top to bottom, left to right: Sternum; pelvis; femur; tibiotarsus; fibula; tarsometatarsus. Scale bar = 10mm. Hampshire Cultural Trust: Hampshire/Natural History Museum, London.

thousands of miles apart, their love of natural history remained a bond that was never broken in their lifetimes. Clark's gift of dodo bones was noted by Sir Henry Miles in 1930, but it was not until our study some eighty-three years later that their true value was appreciated: About this time [1930] Sir henry Miles visited the [curtis] Museum and not many days later we received a letter from the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) asking if the bones of the Dodo in our collection were authentic. We were glad to be able to reply that they came from the same source as their own, viz, through George Clark.¹²⁷



Fig. 8. The pectoral and wing elements are the most fragile and scarcest of all post-cranial skeletal elements. These specimens are particularly well preserved, the scapulae (second from right) especially so. Left to right: humerus; coracoid; scapula; fibula. Hampshire Cultural Trust: Hampshire/Natural History Museum, London.

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