

The Hereford Fungus Eaters

A Pilgrimage to the Site of the First Fungal Foray

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When was the first fungal “foray?” You may think that hunters and gatherers have assembled to collect mushrooms from time immemorial—and likely you’re right. However, it appears that the first formal outing of that name took place in the West Midlands in mid-19th century Victorian England under the auspices of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club. This event was organized in Herefordshire at the urging of polymath, pomologist, and fungus enthusiast Dr. Henry Graves Bull, who was assisted by two invited experts. The first was Edwin Lees, Esq. from a neighboring county, where 20 years earlier he co-founded the Worcestershire Naturalists’ Club and began publishing tracts on regional botany and acquiring familiarity with local mushrooms. He developed sufficient taxonomical repute to be elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society (F.L.S.), whose most illustrious member then was Charles Darwin. Like many British citizen-scientists of the era, Lees appended initials (“F.L.S., F.G.S., &c, &c”) to his name signifying membership in scientific societies, in his case more than a few.

Worthington G. Smith

The other foray “ringer” was Worthington George Smith of Dunstable. Smith was an architect, botanical artist, cartoonist and amateur mycologist who later became even better known as an authority on English fungi. In early 20th century dotage, he led the British Mycological Society, although poor health prevented him from taking the reins for long. In 1875, he achieved measures of infamy for misidentifying the cause of the potato blight in an article published in *Nature*, and elsewhere for announcing that he had solved the mystery of

← Figure 1. “A Week with the Hereford Fungus Eaters”: wood engraving by W. G. Smith published in the November 15, 1873 issue of *The Graphic*. The montage commemorates Woolhope-sponsored forays five years after the first event, and depicts several original foray participants as well as first foray site Holme (then Holm) Lacy Park and House. The key to the panels, beginning with the ladder-laden forager in the upper left corner, was as follows: 1. *The “Fungology by Easy Steps”*—2. *Dr. Bull, M.D., J.P., Hereford*—3. *The Great Fungus from the Bank of England and Royal Observatory, Greenwich*—4. *Gathering fungi under the “Monarch,” Holm Lacy Park*—5. *The Rev. M. J. Berkeley, M.A.*—6. *“In the rear of advanced science”*—7. *Sir George H. Cornewall, Bart.*—8. *Raking for Truffles*—9. *C. E. Broome, M.A.*—10. *Bryngwyn*—11. *Worthington G. Smith, F.L.S.*—12. *The Rev. James Davies, M.A.*—13. *C. B. Plowright, Surgeon*—14. *Fungus Dinner at “Green Dragon”*—15. *The Rev. Wm. Houghton, M.A.*—16. *Mental Effects of Fungus Poisoning*—17. *Gathering the “Vegetable Beef Steak”*—18. *Edwin Lees, F.L.S.*—19. *Gathering the “Marsh Mitrula”*—20. *Holm Lacy House*.

mushroom reproduction by spotting fungal “sperm.” Early in the process of acquiring fungal expertise, he poisoned himself, wife and child with foraged mushrooms, evidently mistaking the “furiously poisonous” *Entoloma sinuatum* (then known



Figure 2. This menu from a Woolhope Club post-foray dinner in 1877 held at Hereford’s Green Dragon Hotel nine years after the first foray, is framed by another W. G. Smith opus. This version, appearing on tables seating 71 feasters that year, was published in an 1887 compendium of *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists’ Club*. A preliminary version, accompanied by full explication of the allusions and visual and verbal puns therein (www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/89004#page/498), had appeared ten years earlier in *The Gardener’s Chronicle*, for which Smith provided much of the botanical art in that era. The bearded, balding gentleman at the top of the menu, seemingly engaged in a death struggle with an earthstar, is cryptogamist Miles Berkeley, who would have needed no introduction to the feasters of that era.

as *Agaricus fertilis*) for the prized St. George's mushroom (*Calocybe gambosa*). He was "continually and fearfully purged," experiencing days of "loathing and lassitude." Turning this into a teachable moment, he published a graphic account in a booklet accompanied by fold-out, life-size chromolithographs of 29 edible and 31 poisonous fungi meant to be carried by foragers into the field.

Approaching the Sesquicentennial

Worthington Smith's portable guide was published the year before 1868's historic Woolhope outing, which was held on October 9th and advertised as a "Foray Amongst the Funguses." Thus, we are approaching its sesquicentennial. The outing of the 26 original foragers ended in a feast prepared from the day's spoils, which were consumed with due pomp and circumstance in Hereford's Mitre Hotel, followed by Mr. Lees reading his paper "Fairy Rings and Funguses that Inhabit them." For balance, the proceedings included a reading of "Why We Should *Not* Eat Funguses" by Rev. J. D. La Touche, with spirited rebuttal by Dr. Bull, who nonetheless concluded the proceedings by moving a vote of thanks to the Reverend for his "well-timed and entertaining paper," which we can imagine received merely polite applause from an audience that was either about to eat or already digesting a fungal feast. The *Transactions* add "in a whisper" that the author of the "counterblast" ate beefsteak fungus with much satisfaction during the feast. This drama aside, the Woolhope foray became a model for annual events held in Herefordshire over the next quarter century and helped to spawn similar collecting expeditions, gatherings and societies throughout Britain—and across the pond in New England, home to the Boston Mycological Club, organized in 1895 and reputed to be the oldest continuously active mycological society in the United States.



Figure 3. Early April finds in Holme Lacy Park included *Verpa conica* (thimble morel) and delectable *Calocybe gambosa*, known in the British Isles as St. George's mushrooms because they fruit on or about St. George's Day (April 23). Pioneering Woolhope forager W. G. Smith, mistaking a toxic agaric for St. George's mushroom, famously poisoned himself and his family after a prior outing.

Foragers' Feast

Some Woolhope forays and ensuing meals were commemorated in Worthington Smith's playful engravings. "A Week with the Hereford Fungus Eaters," published in *The Graphic* in 1873 and reproduced here in Figure 1, includes three 1868 foragers—Bull, Lees, and Smith himself—as well as myco-cognescenti such as cleric-cryptogamist Miles J. Berkeley, eccentric mycologist Mordecai Cubitt Cooke and prolific fungal collector Christopher E. Broome, who joined subsequent forays. The post-foray feasts became the stuff of legend. An engraving "drawn and cut by Worthy-ton GEE(up) Smith," replete with fungal word-play and visual puns, captures the spirit of these occasions. This table card (Figure 2) frames the menu accompanying the 10th annual foray feast attended by 71 Woolhopeans and guests from as far afield as France. In 1877, Woolhope-sponsored activities lasted days and were attended by women as well as men. For the fungophile, it is worth pointing out that "Bifteck," rather than something bovine, meant the oak-loving fungus *Fistulina hepatica*, which the foragers called "vegetable beefsteak." The substitution of "POISONS" for "POISSONS" as the fish course heading was a type-setting and editing snafu that may have been ironically amusing to attendees accustomed to defending dietary choices to non-mycophagists, who then as now did not hesitate to point out the risks of consuming foraged fungi. The "sauce relevée de 'Woolhope Club'" may have been a fungal catsup, of which there were prior proud mentions in the Club *Transactions*, and which is represented in the engraving by a rampant but terrified cat. *Craterellus CORNU-copy-oides* was a novelty prepared to honor visiting French mycologist Maxime Cornu. The *Transactions* rated these black chanterelles "truly delicious" and "highly inviting," despite resembling burnt onions.

The Foray Paradigm

Feasting aside, the overall recipe for reproducing the Woolhope foray paradigm is more elaborate than eating the fruits of the day's labors. The basic ingredients can be summarized as follows:

1. Assemble a group of hardy and interested but mostly inexperienced individuals to spread out in the field to cover as much ground as possible;
2. Sample multiple habitats—in the Woolhope foray by visiting Holme Lacy's parklands and ancient oaks, then Caplar Hill's east-facing forested slopes and cleared crest;
3. Collect as many types of fungi as possible: edible, inedible and poisonous—not just classic mushrooms and toadstools but a range of macrofungi;
4. Assisted by experts, attempt to identify each specimen by genus and species;
5. Prepare (or in the Woolhope example, direct cooks to prepare) a meal from edible specimens collected during the foray and vetted by experts;
6. Publish an account, which in the Woolhope prototype included names, origins, degrees and affiliations of the participants, descriptions of foraging behaviors and bon mots issued from the participants, fungal species list, narrative of sites and habitats visited



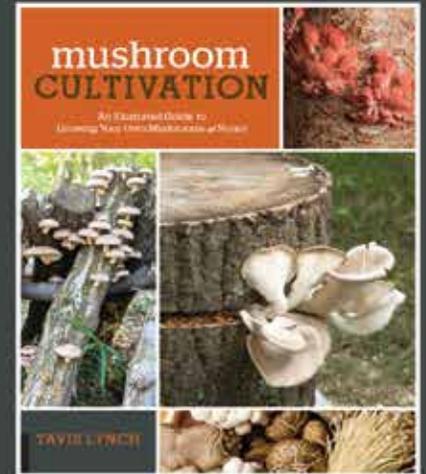
Figure 4. Myco-pilgrim Kelton Minor explores cosmetic uses of one of many *Auricularia auricula* (wood ears) plucked from downed wood in Holme Lacy Park.

(including the trees fungi were growing on, around or under), comments on weather, and merits and demerits of fungal dishes served in the ensuing feast.

Origins of the Woolhope Foragers

Herefordshire's Woolhope Club, which wrote itself into mycological history by pioneering fungal forays, was founded in 1851, 17 years before sponsoring the first formal foray. Woolhope members, whose passions were by no means limited to fungi, were well represented by pastors, physicians and surgeons. Their pursuits included natural history, weather, rocks, fossils, plants, fish, birds, apples and beetles. This was the heyday of British amateur scientists, many of whom tended private collections and contributed to herbaria. It was an era of interest in new forms of life and of near-obsession with classification, systematics and related efforts to organize nature's chaos. It also was a time of exploration of under-investigated and extreme environments, of scientific expeditions, and of exotic gardening, with plants brought to England from the world over—England's footprint having become global. Fungi tended to be grouped with plants and to be studied by botanists. The Woolhope Club conducted its affairs in England's rural western midsection near Wales. This region is prime fungus habitat, being temperate and well-watered, with parks, floodplains, pastures, forests and ancient trees. In service of correcting historical inaccuracies, it should be noted that the legendary Holme Lacey "Monarch Oak," which may have been a source of beefsteak fungus for foray feasts, as depicted in "A Week with the Hereford Fungus

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Figure 5. Eastward view from pastures, orchards and original foraging grounds in Holme Lacy Park, with the old manor house and newer hotel buildings in the middle ground, and with wooded hills (and additional first foray hunting grounds near Caplar Camp) lining the horizon immediately east of the River Wye.

Eaters,” was not as immense as appears in Smith’s cartoon. A contemporary photograph of this sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) reveals more modest proportions, as might have been guessed. Nonetheless, in 1868 its trunk was recorded in *Club Transactions* as being 21 feet 10 inches in diameter, with 38-yard spread of foliage, providing ample basis for artistic license.

Foraging in Top Hats

What did the foragers wear while on the hunt, and how were they otherwise equipped? Smith’s woodcuts provide key documentation in this regard. The early foragers were male, and all wore headgear, although styles varied. Two, including the surgeon C. B. Plowright and the Reverend William Houghton, are depicted in stovepipe hats. I find no record that these were receptacles for fungi, as logic might suggest, but the foragers carried satchels that likely served this purpose, including shoulder-slung, woven baskets similar (or perhaps identical) to fishing creels. Knives nearly as large as machetes were carried by some, notably the surgeon, and these would have been especially valuable in slicing off beefsteak fungus high on trunks and branches of oaks. Other accessories were magnifying glasses, umbrellas and—for some foragers—truffle rakes (indeed C. E. Broome shares his portrait with a rake, as he was especially interested in truffle-like fungi). Footwear

included high boots partially covered by trouser legs with rolled-up cuffs. However, when seeking the Marsh Mitrula (a.k.a. *Mitrula paludosa* or Swamp Beacon, the mycelium of which often is submerged), trousers were tucked inside the boots. For the more gentlemanly of the group, the ensemble was finished off with a double-breasted waistcoat overlying a vest and cravat. The records of Woolhope Club proceedings hint that the umbrella handle and knife, as modeled by the surgeon C. B. Plowright in the *Fungus Eaters* engraving, became symbols or talismans, and were ritually present at Club functions in Hereford. Indeed, they reappear several years later in the *Menu* engraving, where they are crossed in mock-heraldic fashion behind the bottle of “Champign.”

An Apologia for Collecting Fungi

The account of the first foray published in the 1868 *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* begins with the following:

A FORAY AMONG THE FUNGUSES:

*“When Flora’s lovelier tribes give place,
The mushroom’s scorned but curious race,
Bedstead the moist autumnal earth;
A quick but perishable birth.”*

This stanza, attributed to cleric-poet Richard Mant (1776-1848), conveys a sense of how fungi were viewed in generally mycophobic mid-19th century England, an attitude at odds then and now with sentiments in mycophagic Scandinavia, France, Italy, and Eastern Europe. The poem precedes an apology, excerpted here because it suggests that the activities of this band of foragers may have seemed sufficiently strange to contemporaries—and perhaps even to many Woolhope Club members—to warrant pre-emptive justification:

So few people take any real interest in the beautiful tribe of Agarics—autumn’s flowers though they be—and all the other varied and interesting funguses which abound in our fields and woods at this season, that it seemed questionable whether any attempt to promote their study and their usefulness would meet with success. The subject had been taken up, however, by a few of the leading members of the Woolhope Club for some time past, and the very interesting papers read to the club last year, with the beautiful illustrations that adorn the last volume of the club’s Transactions had no doubt prepared the way for their further consideration. Be this as it may, whatever doubt may before have existed, the “Foray amongst the Funguses” carried out by the club has most satisfactorily removed it. There was a good attendance by members, the weather was favourable, the grounds visited were picturesque, and more than all perhaps the presence at the meeting of Mr. Edwin Lees and Mr. Worthington G. Smith to name all the funguses found, and answer all questions put to them, which they did with a readiness and kindness deserving all praise, combined together to make the excursion one of the most profitable and pleasant that the club has ever made. It was a day of real work in the field, a day in which more progress could be made in the practical knowledge of the fungus tribes than could be obtained from weeks of work with books alone.

A Pilgrimage to Herefordshire

The account of the foray following this preamble provides such a vivid and detailed description of sites and habitats scoured for fungi during the day’s activities that I was moved to conduct a voyage of discovery from California to Herefordshire with family and fellow fungal pilgrims. The visit in early April did not allow full re-creation of the Woolhope foray in mid-October, but the sites are preserved to a remarkable degree, and the season did offer the opportunity to chance upon St. George’s Day mushrooms (Figure 3), which W. G. Smith had hoped to be eating when he poisoned himself and his own family on an outing at an earlier stage of development as a mycologist. The initial foraging site in the parklands surrounding Holme Lacy manor (Figures 4 & 5) is largely intact. A century and a half ago, the manor was the realm of Baronet Sir Edwin L. S. Scudamore Stanhope—who would become the 9th Earl of Chesterfield—by whose “kind sanction” the initial foraging site was accessed. Holme Lacy was also a collecting site of later forays, as depicted in “A Week with the Hereford Fungus Eaters.” To kick off the day of the first foray, following appreciative review of fungi from other districts displayed at Hereford’s Mitre Hotel, participants assembled at the still-extant Green Dragon Hotel (site of foray feasts in later

years) and were conveyed to Holme Lacy Park in horse-drawn coaches. A latter-day pilgrim finds that the manor is enlarged into a Warner Leisure Hotel, but the manor house itself is much the same as in Smith’s engravings. The grounds are beautiful, extensive and officially conserved, with gates and stiles allowing passage to the surrounding orchards, pastures and cropland, as well as to forested ridges in the gentle hills approaching the river Wye from the east. We found a variety of spring fungi, including wood ears (Figure 4), King Alfred’s cakes, thimble fungi, morels, inky caps, and the aforementioned St. George’s Day mushrooms. While not expecting a shrine to Dr. Bull’s pioneering foragers, I was surprised to find no one at Holme Lacy aware of (or at least willing to acknowledge) its exalted position in mycological history. Be that as it may, I recommend it to fungophiles and foragers with a sense of history.

The gentlemen foragers of 1868, after tramping over Holme Lacy Park, were conveyed across to the River Wye’s east bank and on to the afternoon’s venue in the slope and hilltop clearing of Caplar Hill and Camp, the site of an Iron Age settlement near Fownhope. Although close to Holme Lacy as the crow flies, the site offered different habitats to the expeditioners—and unique fungi were found there. Caplar Camp is a lovely if undeservedly obscure place to roam over in combination with a stroll along the Wye, which is one of the most pristine rivers in Britain. As at Holme Lacy, my companions and I retraced the original foragers’ steps, being rewarded at the half-grassy top with southerly views of rolling English countryside and the Wye valley, and westerly vistas of the wilder mountains of Wales. Descending from Caplar Camp, the original foragers were conveyed back to Hereford, where they reconvened to admire the day’s finds before consuming some of the them. What was the damage? Three shillings per person for the carriage and four for dinner, with no unpleasantness reported from eating numerous types of foraged fungi, except, as recorded in the *Transactions*, that the beefsteak fungus was “overly spiced” and the chanterelles were “salt as brine and with burnt gravy.” This appeared not to dampen the spirit of culinary experimentation or the overall structure of the proceedings, which were repeated annually for years thereafter until etched in the annals of British mycology as durably as one of Worthington G. Smith’s engravings.

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