

INTERESTING PEOPLE BURIED IN GRANTCHESTER CHURCHYARD

reprinted from past Newsletters for
The Friends of Grantchester Church
- Extract -

FRANK KINGDON-WARD
Botanical collector in the Himalayas
6 November 1885 – 8 April 1958

One of the great Himalayan plant collectors, Frank Kingdon-Ward, was the son of Harry Marshall Ward, Professor of Botany in Cambridge University from 1895 to his early death in 1906. Through his father's early career in Indian forestry and economic botany Frank must have met as a boy forest officers and botanists returning with exciting 'travellers' tales' of the great forests, rivers and mountains of the Himalayas. To explore these lands for himself, and to collect specimens of the rich flora of Rhododendrons, Poppies, Primulas and other groups for introduction into English gardens became his lifelong passion and, for fifty years, between his first expedition in 1909–10 and his last in 1956 – with breaks only during the two World Wars – he was constantly planning, executing and writing up Himalayan expeditions.

In 1924–5, in the prime of life, he planned and carried out, with Lord Cawdor, the greatest of these expeditions, which explored the fantastic gorges of the Tsang-po River in S. E. Tibet, and eventually published in 1926 an account of this exploration in 'The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges'. This is one of the great 'plantsman's books', and fully recommended as a good read even today. Kingdon-Ward is not given to hyperbole and 'purple prose' in his books, but his keen delight in both people and nature shine through these remarkably detailed accounts. Behind the published books there is a set of meticulously-kept field notes, in which every collected herbarium specimen and seed sample is documented with a unique collector's number, with the result that the professional botanists with whom he collaborated could precisely describe plants he had first collected.

This great botanical explorer's grave is marked by a very modest stone in the first Churchyard, situated just inside the western yew hedge that demarcates what is now the Garden of Remembrance. Until the mid-1980s a small commemorative Cherry tree marked the spot, but this unfortunately was killed by a very virulent outbreak of Honey Fungus. After this disease outbreak, it was not possible to replant with any other Cherry or related tree in the Rose family, and an attempt to use the skeleton of the tree to support a Himalayan Rose also failed. However, when Mrs Jean Rasmussen, Frank's second wife and much involved with him in expeditions in later years, indicated her interest in a memorial, a new attempt was made to find a worthy commemorative shrub, and a very attractive Berberis, *B. calliantha*, was chosen, two specimens of which were planted to flank the headstone.

The choice of shrub to mark Kingdon-Ward's grave was made carefully, with the cultural conditions in mind. Most of the fine garden plants introduced by him are unfortunately not suitable for our porous, chalky soils or our dry 'Continental' climate. In particular, many spectacular Rhododendrons, from which ideal plants could have been chosen, were, alas, totally intolerant of chalky Cambridge soils. Other small trees (such as Sorbus) could not be risked because of Honey Fungus.

Having chosen the *Berberis* one can appreciate Kingdon-Ward's accurate recording of his finds. Via the collector's numbers it is possible to trace exactly when and where the explorer collected the berries from which our garden plants of *Berberis calliantha* descend - and it could hardly be a more dramatic place! Let Kingdon-Ward tell us himself, from chapter XIII of his book. They leave a Tibetan village, Gyala:

'November 16th [1924] dawned brightly, after 10° of frost ...
Final preparations were soon made, and at 10.30 we started on the journey ...

Just outside the village someone had set light to a heap of juniper branches, and the coolies now stood around, passionately repeating long prayers to the spirits, that they might guard them from the dangers of the gorge ...

[Description of four days' travel on foot along the great Tsangpo gorge]

On November 20th, after a fine night, followed by a heavy dew in the early morning which drenched the forest, we scrambled down the cliff and got our third boiling-point reading in the river-bed since leaving Gyala. The altitude was 8,506 feet. Our day's march lay partly in the river-bed, partly in the forest. Early in the afternoon the river suddenly swung due south, and through a window in the jungle we looked out and saw the northern glaciers of Namcha Barwa, coldly menacing, relentlessly pushing as though to engulf the forest; but as a matter of fact they are withdrawing their forces. Next minute we came out on to cultivation. Nothing could have come as a greater surprise. The great river was plunging down, down, boring ever more deeply into the bowels of the earth. The snow-peaks enclosed us in a ring of ice. Dense jungle surged over the cliffs, filled the glens, and marched boldly up to battle with the snow. And in the midst of all this strife, in a quiet bay in the mountains, round which the maelstrom of river, forest, and ice fought dumbly for dominion, was one poor little badly cultivated field!

Ascending by a path to a terrace, we saw perched on a knoll, in the midst of a great swamp, the little wooden monastery of Pamakochung.'

In this 'great swamp' by the monastery of Pemakochung Kingdon-Ward collected 'blue-black, pendent' berries of a *Berberis*, a sample to which he gave his collector's number K.W.6285. This we know from the excellent field-note quoted by B.O. Mulligan, a taxonomist at the Royal Horticultural Society's Garden at Wisley, who published the *Berberis* as a new species, *B. calliantha*, in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* (vol. 97: No 394) in 1935. The collection must have been made on the day of their stay in this isolated monastery at the top end of the really precipitous part of the river gorge, which they still had to explore in the weeks ahead. And there, as they say, we must leave Kingdon-Ward, Cawdor and their Tibetan friends - though you can read for yourself about their further adventures in 'The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges'. When you have read the book, you will marvel at the contrast with the peaceful Grantchester resting-place where, it is hoped, his pretty *Berberis* will grow by the grave as a living memorial.

Max Walters May 1995