

**FOSSILS FROM THE FALKLAND ISLANDS IN THE
COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WALES,
CARDIFF.**

by

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A small collection of fossils from the Falkland Islands, hitherto resting in obscurity, is to be found in Cardiff, at the National Museum of Wales (NMW). It comprises twelve specimens illustrating four of the well-known species that are fairly widely preserved in the sandstone of the Fox Bay Formation (Devonian Period, about 405 million years old), three brachiopods and a trilobite. The museum reference numbers are NMW20.328.G1 to G12, assigned as follows:

- G1-G3 ... *Schellwienella sullivanii* (Brachiopod)
- G4-G6 ... *Australospirifer hawkinsii* (Brachiopod)
- G7-G11 ... *Australocoelia palmata* (Brachiopod)
- G12 ... *Burmeisteria herschelii* (Trilobite)

The collection (Figure 1) was donated to the NMW in 1920 by Thomas William Proger (b 11.7.1860–d 2.4.1947), a local businessman and a director of the Falkland Islands Sheep Farming Company. That enterprise had been established by his wife's family, the Waldrons, to improve livestock breeds in the Falklands, Patagonia and Brazil through the export of pedigree rams – Welsh sheepdogs were also exported. But in particular, the Waldron family were associated with the Port Howard farm settlement on West Falkland. This was founded in 1866 by James Lovegrove Waldron (1829-1901) and his brother Henry Waldron (ca 1839-1919) and became one of the most successful farms in the islands, remaining in family ownership until 1990. Biographies of J. L. Waldron and H. Waldron were written by the late Jane Cameron for David Tatham's *Dictionary of Falklands Biography* (2008). According to *Who's Who in Wales, 1920*, Thomas Proger married Gertrude Waldron of Moultsford, Berkshire, on 23 June 1892. They had three children, Olwen, Glyndwr and Lancelot. Gertrude died in 1923. In addition to his association with the Waldron's Falkland Islands enterprise, Proger also had an interest in a coffee-growing estate in Costa Rica, and travelled quite extensively in South America. A photograph of Proger taken in about 1921 is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 1. A selection of the fossils collected in the Falkland Islands in 1919 by Thomas Proger. Scale bars are graduated in centimetres. All images © National Museum of Wales.

- a. *Australocoelia palmata*
- b. *Australospirifer hawkinsii*
- c. *Burmeisteria herschelii*
- d. *Schellwienella sulivani*



Figure 2. Thomas William Proger (11.7.1860 – 2.4.1947) photographed on 3rd October 1921. Image © Cardiff Naturalists' Society.

As is usual with fossil specimens from the Fox Bay Formation, Proger's brachiopods are preserved as a variety of internal moulds and external impressions, the original shells having been dissolved by water percolating through the host sandstone over millions of years. Preservation of the trilobite is rather different. The specimen is not of the whole animal, but shows the original exoskeleton material of about eight thoracic segments contained in the remains of what was probably a carbonate-rich concretion that formed at an early stage in the compaction of soft sediment into a Fox Bay Formation mudstone. Again, such concretions are not uncommon, and at one or two localities are fairly abundant. They have been frequently noted at Port Howard,

West Falkland, where the 'Cardiff' trilobite was collected according to a manuscript note accompanying the specimen. There is no specific record of where the brachiopods were collected although the note now associated with the trilobite may originally have been intended to locate the full collection. A West Falkland provenance for the brachiopods is certainly suggested by the appearance of the host sandstone (a micaceous composition and fine lamination), together with the absence of any trace of cleavage in the rock or deformation of the fossils (as is commonly seen in parts of East Falkland). In view of the family connection with the Port Howard settlement it is highly likely that all of the specimens came from that vicinity.

Proger may have visited the Falklands more than once but the trilobite is recorded as having been collected in December 1919; the brachiopods may well have been collected at the same time. Little was known about the fossils when they arrived at the museum and they remained unregistered until their recent rediscovery following publication of details of similar museum collections elsewhere¹. In addition to the fossils, Proger is recorded as donating to the museum in 1920 twelve 'Falkland Pebble' agates, which cannot now be located, and some plant specimens. The plants were donated to the Museum in 1922 and so may possibly have been acquired during a trip to the Falklands subsequent to the one on which the fossils and agates were collected; many of them are northern species of introduced pasture grasses. The museum records also note the donation of 135 mollusca, mostly bivalve shells, that do not seem to have been retained and may not have all derived from the Falkland Islands. Donated by Proger and still extant in the museum collections are a taxidermy specimen of an Adelie penguin and the egg of a Black-faced Ibis, neither of which are native to the Falklands. The former must have originated farther south, whereas the latter was probably acquired in South America. The Museum holds correspondence with Proger concerning specimens that he hoped to collect during a trip to South America in 1931.

Proger was active in the Cardiff Naturalists' Society, serving as its president on two occasions, first in 1903-04 and again in 1927-28, the Society's Diamond Jubilee, when his presidential address given on 20th October 1927 was entitled 'The River Amazon'; he became an Honorary Member in 1934. Other lectures delivered by Proger to the Society included, on 20th January 1921, 'An account of my recent visit to the Falkland Islands', and on 10th March 1921, 'Patagonia and the Straits of Magellan'; the latter lecture was illustrated by lantern slides and specimens. He subsequently spoke on 'Sugar and Coffee in Costa Rica' (8th November 1922) and on 'Coffee, sugar and banana growing in Costa Rica' (18th October 1923). Proger also had a strong connection to the Cardiff Museum (forerunner of the National Museum) serving as an Honorary Curator appointed by the Cardiff Naturalists' Society from 1883 to 1913, and later as a member of the National Museum of Wales Court of Governors.

Proger published many articles in the *Notes and Transactions of the Cardiff Naturalists' Society*, most of which concern the ornithology of South Wales; he does not appear to have written any descriptions of Falkland Islands natural history. He died on 2 April 1947 and his obituary was carried in *Notes and Transactions* Volume 79 for 1945-1948.

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Note

1. Stone, P. and Rushton, A. W. A. 2012. The pedigree and influence of fossil collections from the Falkland Islands: from Charles Darwin to continental drift. *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, Vol. 123, 520-532.

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