



## Milford-on-Sea Historical Record Society

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## A Note on William Saville Kent, at one time of Belsito, Milford-on-Sea

By The Rev. S. G. Hooper

It seems right that the Society should place on record some facts about this distinguished scientist who lived in Milford at the house known as "Belsito" (now demolished).

Saville Kent was apparently an amateur zoologist. He does not appear to have studied at any university or to have taken a degree, but in addition to being a Fellow of the Linnaean Society from June 1873, he was a Fellow of the Zoological Society from January 1870. For many years also he was a Fellow of the Royal Microscopical Society.

His first appointment seems to have been as a temporary Assistant at the Royal College of Surgeons (1868) and he then became Assistant in the Natural History Department of the British Museum from 1869 to 1873 when he retired.

He wrote his first big work, "*A Manual of the Infusoria*", during the next few years and published it in 1880-1882 (two large volumes). This book was an important one for its period. At some time he seems to have held a post at the Brighton Aquarium, for which he wrote a Guide Book.

After going to Hobart in 1885 he went to Australia and became Commissioner and Inspector of Fisheries for Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. He published his big book on the Great Barrier Reef in 1893, after his return to England. This was followed by his third large work four years later – "*The Naturalist in Australia*" (1897) – which contains a good portrait as frontispiece.

At some time he was President of the Royal Society of Queensland. On his return from Australia Saville Kent went to live at Chiswick (1891) where he kept a pair of koalas in his study – the first time these animals had been brought to England alive.

Dr. Clifford Dobell, F.R.S., of the Medical Research Council, to whom I wrote asking for any facts he could supply, writes that it is extremely difficult to find out anything about Saville Kent. Only one very short obituary notice seems to have been published at the time of his death. (See Proceedings of the Linnaean Society 121 (1909), page 42, by the late Dr. Daydon Jackson, Secretary of the Linnaean Society). There are some unpublished letters of Saville Kent in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington.

He gave much attention to oysters and oyster fishing and urged the establishment of a biological station on Thursday Island, a central depot on the Torres Straits for pearl fishing. He claimed the power of inducing pearl oysters to produce fine pearls by special treatment.

On June 21st, 1906 he exhibited at one of the Linnaean Society's meetings a series of photographs in three colour transparencies and lantern slides of the fishes and fauna of the Polynesian coral reefs. The British Museum contains many of his specimens. In the house at Milford there was a sample of a large pearl shell with artificial pearls stuck on it for a fruit dish.

At Belsito he added a storey to the house and built a large greenhouse in which he spent much time and in which he kept green lizards.

His wife's maiden name was Livesey, her family being connected with cotton or coal (or both) at Oldham. At her death she left her house, Belsito, to trustees for use as a holiday house for Clergy, and it was used for that purpose for a number of years.

Saville Kent died from heart failure after an operation in 1908. In the churchyard at Milford his grave has a headstone of Italian marble and a kerb which contained specimens of corals from the Barrier Reef. The inscription reads: "In loving memory of William Saville Kent, Biologist and Author. Born July 20th, 1845. Died October 11th, 1908. 'Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him'. Also of Mary Anne, his wife. Born January 1st, 1884. Died April 14th, 1919.

*Note. The house, Belsito, has now been demolished and replaced by flats.*

### **Extract from Major George Cornwallis-West's "Edwardian Hey-Days"**

"One of the most interesting, if unsuccessful, ventures I ever went into was in connection with the scientific cultivation of pearls. I happened to go to Newlands for a weekend, and on my mother's table saw two huge pearl-oyster shells on which were beautiful black baroque pearls. She told me that a gentleman by the name of Mr. Saville Kent who had been an inspector of fisheries under the Australian Government, had given them to her and had stated that they were the results of his own experiments in pearl cultivation. I knew the Japanese had already succeeded in doing this to a certain extent, but nothing I had ever seen equalled these.

Then next morning I interviewed Mr. Saville Kent, who showed me further specimens and said he believed that, if sufficient money were forthcoming, he could scientifically irrigate the fleshy folds of the oyster sufficiently to cause it to produce a perfect sphere. I took some of his specimens with me to London and showed them to several friends of mine, one of whom, Joe Laycock, said he would come into a syndicate, but would first like the opinion of some well-known expert. Accordingly one afternoon he and I went round to Welby's in Garrick Street, produced one of the shells with a baroque pearl attached, and asked them what they considered to be the value of the pearl. The answer was "Anything from fifty to sixty pounds." As it had not cost more than a few shillings to produce, it seemed worth while going on, and Laycock became one of the members of the syndicate.

"Mr. Saville Kent was sent out to an Island off the North Coast of Australia, near the Torres Straits, with sufficient money to continue his experiments. He maintained that it would take at least three years to produce entirely satisfactory results. A year later he sent us back some marvellous specimens so far as that proved the possibility of creating the actual pearl. After two years he himself returned home on sick leave, and the specimens he brought with him were still better, and made us enthusiastic. Our hopes were dashed, however, when, a few weeks later, he became seriously ill and died.

"When the syndicate was formed he had declined to acquaint the board with his actual secret. We all knew enough about the formation of a pearl to realise that he must have discovered some way of opening the oyster without killing it, but what that method was, and what was the irritant used to start the formation of the pearl had remained a secret. The only way in which he had met us had been by depositing in the Bank an envelope which he said contained the whole secret of the process, and with this we had to be content. When, after his death, the envelope was opened, we found nothing intelligible, and it seemed fairly obvious that he meant to carry the secret with him to his grave. We all lost our money, but it was exciting while it lasted."