

George Bentham (1800 – 1884)

George Bentham was born on 22 September 1800 at Stoke in the south of England, the second son of naval architect Sir Samuel Bentham, and Mary Sophia, the eldest daughter of Dr George Fordyce, FRS. He spent his childhood in Russia and France, and had no formal education, but from a young age showed a propensity for sustained and concentrated attention to any subject that interested him, and a remarkable linguistic aptitude. He became acquainted with botany at Angoulême when he used his mother's copy of de Candolle's *Flora Française* to identify a plant. For several years he managed his father's estate at Montpellier in the south of France, and his early plant collecting in the area formed the basis of his herbarium. In 1825 he went to London, where he met Robert Brown and other important botanists, and in Glasgow he met William Jackson Hooker.

Although Bentham studied law and qualified as a barrister in 1831, inheritances from his father and uncle enabled him to devote his life to botany, and he never practised. In 1829 he became secretary to what became the Royal Horticultural Society, and with the help of John Lindley, turned its fortunes around, sponsoring plant hunters and introducing the society's Chiswick Horticultural Fêtes. In 1833 he married Sarah, the youngest daughter of Sir Halford Brydges, and they lived in London for two years before moving to Herefordshire.

By 1854 the growing cost of his library and herbarium, by then numbering more than 100,000 specimens, led him to offer them to Kew and be made available to visiting botanists. Urged by Hooker not to abandon his work, the couple moved back to London and although never on the Kew staff, Bentham worked there almost every day for the next thirty years. In addition to his two colonial floras (Hong Kong and Australia) he also produced the *Handbook of the British Flora* (1858), which promoted botany as a pastime for amateurs and became a classic. In 1883 the *Genera Plantarum* was completed, the result of a 21-year collaboration with Sir Joseph Hooker. The monumental work outlined what became known as the Bentham-Hooker classification system for flowering plants, which is still in use at Kew.

George Bentham was attracted to botanical studies by the logical methods imbibed from the writings of his uncle, political economist Jeremy Bentham, that could be applied to them – and he was particularly taken with the analytical tables for identifying plants. He died on 10 September 1884, within a fortnight of his 84th birthday, childless, but with a plant from New Zealand's subantarctic islands named after him: *Hebe benthamii*, discovered on the Auckland Islands by Joseph Dalton Hooker in 1840, on Sir James Clark Ross's Antarctic expedition.



Hebe benthamii

Previously known as *Veronica benthamii* and *Leonohebe benthamii*, *Hebe benthamii* is a bushy to spreading low shrub growing to a metre tall. The oblong leaves, deep green and shiny on the upper surface, are deeply fringed with soft fine white hairs. The bright blue to purple-blue flowers, which are relatively large for the size of the plant, are born in rather crowded terminal inflorescences, with leaf-like bracts. It is restricted to Campbell and Auckland Islands, where it grows in rocky places, and on peat in snow tussock grassland. A distinctive species difficult to grow in cultivation, it is rarely seen outside its natural habitat.