

George Caley (1770 – 1829)

George Caley, the son of a horse dealer, was born on 10 June 1770 at Craven, Yorkshire, England. After a formal education of only four years at Manchester Free Grammar School, he left to work in his father's stables. To learn more about farriery (horse-medicine) he studied botany, and encouraged by the celebrated Dr William Withering, became associated with the Manchester School of Botanists. In 1795 he approached Sir Joseph Banks, and after working at Kew and other gardens, he was sent by Banks to New South Wales, Australia, as his first residential botanical collector in the colonies.



Paracaleana minor

Paracaleana means 'closely related to *Caleana*', which was named after George Caley. Once found in Northland and Bay of Plenty, and now known from a single small colony at Rotorua, *Paracaleana minor* is a rare Australian vagrant first recorded in New Zealand in the early 1900s. It is a slender orchid with a narrow linear leaf attached at the base of the plant. The thin red flower stem supports 1–7 yellowish-green "upside down" flowers, with the irritable labellum, which is covered in raised purple glands, at the top, attached by a flat, curved, sensitive strap. Side-on, the flower resembles a flying duck (hence the common name, duck orchid); from the front it looks like an insect. Peak flowering is November and December. Assumed to be insect pollinated, it also reproduces from new tubers.

PHOTO: NZFS, provided by Chris Ecroyd

Caley arrived in Sydney in April 1800 and was allotted a house at Parramatta where he could keep his specimens and plants. He devoted the next ten years to exploration and the collection of natural history specimens, keeping a record of each excursion in a journal, and sending enormous quantities of dried specimens, living plants, seeds and descriptions to his patron. He also investigated the complexities of the *Eucalyptus* genus by following up the different Aboriginal names of similar looking trees, and through his excursions and friendly contact with the Aborigine people he acquired an intimate knowledge of the countryside.

An astute observer, Caley was energetic and diligent, with an insatiable desire to explore and collect. However, he had a stubborn independence, a quick temper and lack of tact, and his frank and impartial comments and criticisms were appreciated less by his contemporaries than they were by later historians. His response to instructions was to do nothing at all, but when left to his own devices he exceeded expectations. It was said in New South Wales that Caley and the common hangman were the only two people who did as they pleased!

In 1807 Banks terminated Caley's appointment, but offered him a small pension, and agreed for him to remain in New South Wales if he wished. Mail services were slow, and it was May 1810 before Caley left for England. He lived there until 1816, when he was appointed superintendent of the botanical gardens at St Vincent, in the West Indies. Harassed in his work by the residents, and suffering from a tropical illness, he resigned at the end of 1822. He returned to England and lived at Bayswater, London, until his death on 23 May 1829, predeceased by his wife whom he had married in 1816. They had no children.

George Caley's work in New South Wales received little recognition, other than several plants named after him. When the celebrated botanist Robert Brown was in Australia as naturalist on Matthew Flinders' historic Terra Australis expedition, he joined Caley on some botanical excursions, and was impressed with the nearly fifty species of *Eucalyptus* Caley had studied and collected around Port Jackson. Ironically, it was a sensitive and irritable genus of orchids that Brown named *Caleana*.