

# James Dickson (1738 – 1822)

James (Jacobus) Dickson was born at Kirke House in Traquair, near Peebles in the Scottish Borders, the son of Robert Dickson, a Teviotdale nurseryman. As a boy he worked in the gardens of the Earl of Traquair, where his interest in botany developed. James' brother Walter had a nursery in Leith Walk, Edinburgh, considered at the time to be the best and most extensive in Scotland, and James, too, established a nursery in Perth before moving south as a young man to London, where he was employed in nurseries at Kensington and Hammersmith. He may also have worked as a gardener at one or more of the large estates on the outskirts of London before setting up in business as a seedsman and nurseryman at Covent Garden in 1772.

He supplied plants to William Forsyth, chief superintendent of the royal gardens at Kensington and St James (the flowering plant genus *Forsythia* was named in his honour). He was also friendly with Joseph Banks, who gave him access to his extensive botanical library, introduced him to other botanists, and in 1771 employed him to take over the care of the British Museum's garden. When his first wife died in 1786 Dickson married the sister of explorer Mungo Park. In 1788 Dickson was one of seven eminent men involved in the founding of the Linnean Society of London. He played a role in organising expeditions elsewhere, and introduced his brother-in-law to Banks, who sponsored Mungo Park's 1795 exploration of West Africa. With six others, Dickson was a founding member of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804, and he served as vice-president from its inception.

Dickson was particularly interested in mosses and other non-flowering plants, and travelled and collected extensively in Scotland, including the Hebrides. A keen observer in the field, he was nicknamed "lynx-eyed Dickson" by renowned botanist James Edward Smith.

Dickson published a four-volume major work on cryptogams, *Fasciculus Plantarum Cryptogamicarum Britanniae* (1785–1801), describing 400 species, many of them previously unidentified in Britain. Watercolour illustrations were by James Sowerby, and for assistance with writing up his discoveries – for he may have lacked a formal education – Dickson relied on John Siers and Robert Brown. He was obviously an astute businessman, however, for by 1817 he owned a large house in Croydon, and when he died in 1822 he left £3,500 to his wife, £200 to each of his two daughters and his half of the Covent Garden business to his son (also James).

*Dicksonia*, a genus of tree ferns, was named in his honour by French botanist L'Héritier de Brutelle in 1788.

## ***Dicksonia fibrosa***

*Dicksonia* is a genus of 20–25 species of tree ferns, mainly of the Southern Hemisphere. New Zealand has three, all of them endemic. *Dicksonia fibrosa* has a very stout, soft, fibrous, reddish-brown trunk up to 6 metres tall, a dense crown of harsh, brown-green fronds, narrower than those of other tree-ferns, and a heavy skirt of dead, pale-brown complete fronds. Probably the slowest growing of the tree ferns, it is a subcanopy species in lowland to montane forest or semi-open country from Waikato southwards, but is common only in central districts of the North Island. Known as wheki-ponga or kuripākā to the Māori, the species was particularly useful for its fibrous trunk from which slabs were cut for building rat-proof storehouses.

