

Arthur Dudley Dobson (1841 – 1934)

Arthur Dudley Dobson, the second son in Edward and Mary Ann Dobson's family of ten children, was born at Islington, London, on 9 September 1841. His father, a well-qualified architect, surveyor and civil engineer, worked from 1846 to 1849 as a railway engineer near Nottingham, and his two eldest boys received their early education there. In 1850, when the railway boom ended, he sailed on the *Cressy* to Lyttelton, New Zealand, taking George and Arthur with him. Mary and the rest of the family joined them the following year.

Life was difficult at first, and in 1851 George and Arthur were sent to Tasmania to live with their uncle, the Reverend Charles Dobson, and be taught by him. In 1854 Edward's appointment as provincial engineer for Canterbury brought an improvement in the family's finances; the boys returned to New Zealand and attended the small church school later to become Christ's College. From their father they learnt practical building skills as well as surveying and engineering, and Arthur began a five-year apprenticeship with him.

Arthur's work was predominantly exploring and surveying a large part of North Canterbury for projects such as swamp drainage, flood control and road construction, sometimes in association with his father, or brothers Edward and George. For two years he worked with Haast, exploring and collecting geological specimens in the Aoraki/Mt Cook-Tekapo area. He also made an extensive survey of the West Coast, helped by local Māori and

his knowledge of Te Reo. In November 1866, a month after he was appointed assistant provincial engineer for Nelson, he married Eleanor Lewis; they were to have four children. He explored the Motueka and Karamea districts, and after a series of promotions became chief surveyor for Nelson in 1871.

In 1878 Arthur and his father went into partnership. They upgraded the Timaru waterworks, organised three water supply projects, surveyed a railway line through the Southern Alps and reported on the provision of a public water supply for Christchurch. In 1885, when public work was curtailed by the depression, the partnership was dissolved, and Arthur moved to Australia. He pursued a successful engineering career in Victoria, but bank failures led to his return to New Zealand. In 1901 he was appointed city engineer, Christchurch, and held the position until 1921.

Arthur Dudley Dobson was a member and office-bearer of several prestigious societies, and was knighted in 1931 – a rather belated recognition of the Dobson family's service to this country. He died in Christchurch on 5 March 1934, a man who had done much to open up the lands and resources of three provinces. At Arthur's Pass a stone obelisk stands by the road as his memorial, and both the alpine plant, *Aciphylla dobsonii*, first collected by Dobson and Haast in 1862, and Mt Dobson where it was found, were named in his honour.



Aciphylla dobsonii

The genus *Aciphylla* (Latin *acicula* 'needle'; Greek *phyllum* 'leaf': speargrass) is a distinctive and important alpine one, with some 38 species, all except two confined to New Zealand. They vary in habit, plant and leaf size and shape, and as they flower irregularly, can be difficult to identify. *Aciphylla dobsonii* is a tufted herb with deep taproots, forming hard cushions up to one metre across. Its thick, rigid leaves have two leaf-like stipules and a single blade, and the spectacular globose flowers are on short stout stems. It is confined to high alpine fellfield, especially along exposed ridge crests, on the higher mountains of South Canterbury and North Otago, where it is often the most conspicuous plant.