

William Burchell

William John Burchell is regarded as one of the greatest of the early African explorers. He was an accomplished naturalist, who amassed vast natural history collections and described many new species. His achievements were not fully recognised by his contemporaries and he became a solitary and unhappy figure in later life.

His early years

Burchell was born in 1782, the eldest son of a wealthy nurseryman. He developed an interest in natural history early on in life and was particularly taken with botany, which he studied at Kew Gardens.



In his mid twenties Burchell took up the position of schoolmaster and acting botanist on the island of St Helena. His fiancée set out to join him in 1807, however, upon arrival she announced a change of heart; she was to marry the captain of the ship that had carried her to the island, and Burchell was to remain a bachelor until his death in 1863.

What is 'Learning more'?

'Learning more' presents a series of articles about the Museum and its collections. It is designed for older students, teachers, researchers, and anyone who wants to find out more about particular aspects of the Museum's work and its history.

This article introduces the life and work of William Burchell. Many of Burchell's specimens were donated to the Museum's zoological collections in 1865.

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Burchell's first expedition

In 1810, Burchell embarked upon his first expedition, which he documented in his two-volume work *Travels in the interior of southern Africa*. He returned to England in 1815 with over 50,000 specimens, many of which he donated to the British Museum, Natural History (now known as the Natural History Museum, London).

Unfortunately, many of these specimens were damaged whilst in storage at the British Museum. This led to a dispute between Burchell and the London museum's authorities, with much resentment on both sides. Following this quarrel, the keeper of the collections named Burchell's zebra *Asinus burchelli* (*Asinus* is from the Latin, meaning ass or fool).

Equus burchelli

Burchell's zebra - skull and lower jaw



Ceratotherium simum

White rhinoceros - teeth from the type specimen



Burchell's collections

Burchell amassed a substantial collection on his first expedition in southern Africa; it included the type specimens of the zebra, and the white rhinoceros.

Burchell's second expedition and later years

Burchell set out upon his second expedition in 1825. This time he travelled in eastern Brazil, where again, he collected vast numbers of specimens including over 16,000 insects, 817 birds skins of 362 species, and many plants and other animals.

In 1830, Burchell returned to Britain and in 1834 was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University in recognition of his work. However, his travels had exhausted his personal fortune and he gradually became an isolated and disillusioned figure. In 1863 Burchell took his own life.

Centropus superciliosus burchelli



Laniarius atrococcineus



Lamprotornis nitens phoenicopterus



Burchell's second expedition

Burchell's second and final expedition took him to Brazil; here he amassed over 16,000 insect specimens, and over 350 species of bird.

Burchell's collections at the Museum

In 1865, two years after his death, Miss Anna Burchell presented the bulk of her brother's entomological, ethnological, geological and zoological material to the newly open University Museum. Many of Burchell's bird and mammal types were included in this donation and survive to this day. This collection comprises specimens collected in South Africa in 1810-1815, Portugal and Tenerife in 1825 and eastern Brazil 1825-1830. His botanical specimens and manuscripts were given to the Kew Museum. To find out more about Burchell's specimens in the zoological collections, search under "Burchell" in the zoology online databases.



Selected references

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