

William Markwick: zoologist, botanist and phenologist 1739-1813



William Markwick, later Eversfield, (1739-1813) was a wealthy landowner of Catsfield. Markwick is not a famous name, either in his or in our time, but it has endured because of his deep observations of flora and fauna and his consequent association with Gilbert White of Selborne.

Few observers of the natural world at that time were without substantial resources – they had to have the time for their pursuit and the education to write about it – and Markwick was no exception. He came from a well-known Sussex family whose earliest records are connected with the Jevington area, near Eastbourne. Of the first known ancestor all we know is his name, William, referred to as William of Wannock. There followed a further two Williams, the first of whom died at Jevington in 1699, buried there on 22 April. His son William was born in 1661 or 1662 (baptised at Jevington on 31 January 1662). This William obtained or inherited the Catsfield property and he was appointed High Sheriff for Sussex (a year-long appointment) at the end of 1720. It has been suggested that a brother of the William born in 1661/62 was Nathaniel Markwick, in his day a much praised churchman and author but no Sussex record can be found for him and other references place him as born at Croydon, his father being a James Markwick¹. William's son James, to be the father of our subject, was baptised at Bexhill on 24 October 1710.

The family came to Catsfield late in the seventeenth century, and William was born there in 1739, son of James Markwick and Mary Eversfield who had married at Eastbourne in 1735; the Eversfields were a major landowning family of northern and eastern Sussex. James was the fourth Markwick in the public records; the couple's family home was Catsfield Manor next to and behind the parish church. There were well-known clockmakers of London named Markwick but a connection with the Sussex family cannot be established.

William's sister Mary married George Tilden of Battle, one of the early partners of the law firm later known as Raper and Fovargue and now Heringtons. William had set out to be a barrister but never practised law (nor did he complete his Cambridge degree). There was no need for him to do so when he had sufficient means and wished to remain in the countryside. He had an estate of some 1600 acres stretching from Hastings to Eastbourne and as a country gentleman he was involved in local affairs as a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant for Sussex.

He began his observations before he was 30. His natural history diary dated from or before 1768 when, just like Gilbert White at the same time, he noted down the times of the year at which birds and insects appeared and disappeared and plants put out their leaves and flowers. *The Hastings and East Sussex Naturalist* (Vol III, no. 5, 1922) contains an essay on Markwick by W H Mullens that quotes extensively from his diary. He did not rush to print: his first known publication was dated 1791. He was conversant with Latin, of course, and translated some of Linnaeus's work into English, and he was a good artist, an essential

quality for someone describing the natural world. His *Aves Sussexienses* of 1795 was the first study of Sussex birdlife.

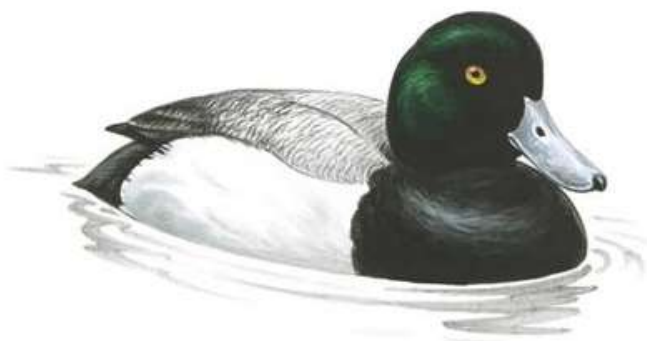


Extract from Google Earth of Catsfield Manor, tucked behind the Church of St Lawrence on Church Street, Catsfield

Much of Markwick's land was on the Pevensey Levels and along the coast, and he was particularly interested in marshland and wading birds, fish and jellyfish as well as being a competent botanist and artist. He wrote articles for publication in the Transactions of the Linnaean Society: six papers between the years 1789 to 1801 (Trans. I, II, IV and VI, 1797-1807). He also submitted papers in 1797, 1800, 1806 and 1807, which remain in manuscript form. He also obviously sent specimens to the Society, evidenced by an amusing letter in their collections² dated from Catsfield 28th January 1795, which read:

'... You may remember that in the year 1789 I sent you a specimen of the Scaup Duck *Anas marila** together with the Tippet Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) but your servants thinking them delicacies for the table dressed them for your dinner, before you could examine them as a naturalist...' *Greater Scaup (now *Aythya marila*)

He became a Fellow of the Linnaean Society in 1792 and as well as papers he sent them further specimens of a male and female Scaup Duck. One can hope that they too were not eaten.



Male Greater Scaup Duck

From <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/scaup/>

But most of Markwick's work is to be found very close to Battle, in Hastings Museum. There are 46 volumes, bound in calf, contain his hand-written records and 'scrapbooks' from books and newspapers. On one occasion whilst copying extracts from the English translation (1786) of Count Buffon's 'Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux' (1770-86) 1796 he noted the French naturalist Buffon's comments on the value of the beaks of birds such as the Crossbill, which he called "a deformity", and of the Black Skimmer "an awkward and defective instrument". Markwick correctly pointed out that these were "admirably well formed" for their specific purposes and rebuked Buffon for "finding fault with the works of the Creator".

His data was published alongside the similar records collected by his contemporary, the Rev. Gilbert White (1720-93). As far as we know Markwick and White never met or corresponded, in spite of the fact that they had so many interests in common, and the first edition of White's *The natural history of Selborne* does not mention him. However the 1802 second edition, issued after White's death and edited by White's nephew, John, included and acknowledged his additions. Markwick's pioneering work in phenology, the study of when annual events happen in nature, formed part of the additions. Some 500 of his detailed observations are in this edition and it was praised as "a work of great exactness, and the result of as much, and as patient observation as perhaps was ever brought to the subject". It covered a comparison of the seasons, from 1768 to 1793. It was noted that the additions were obtained through "the kindness of William Markwick, Esq., FLS, well known as an accurate observer of nature". A note in the 2nd Edition of *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*⁴ read:

William Markwick, afterwards Eversfield, derived from his residence in the country opportunities of observing nature, which he embraced with a readiness worthy of a pupil of Gilbert White. His Naturalist's Calendar affords ample evidence of his perseverance in attending to and noting occurrences in both the organized kingdoms of the creation; and the remarks subjoined by him, in numerous instances, to our author's Observations on various Parts of Nature, shew him to have been a sensible as well as a diligent observer. He communicated to the Linnean Society various essays on subjects of interest to the British zoologist, which were published in the earlier volumes of the Transactions of that body: the first of them, On the Migration of certain Birds, and on other Matters relating to the Feathered Tribes, included a Table of the annual appearance and disappearance of certain birds, which was continued to the end of 1794 in a subsequent communication, entitled *Aves Sussexienses*; or, a Catalogue of Birds found in the County of Sussex, with Remarks. His last paper consisted of Observations on the Clover Weevil, and was published in 1801. His death took place in 1813.

In 1789 at the age of 50 Markwick married Mary Date of Southampton, and they had four children. The connection with Catsfield was not to last, however. His uncle Sir Charles Eversfield of Denne Park, Horsham and The Grove, Hastings died unmarried in October 1784 and his baronetcy expired. The Grove was the manor house for the lords of the manor of Hollington. Sir Charles' sister Olive Eversfield, also sister to William Markwick's mother, survived him but it seems that the properties were held in an Eversfield trust. In 1803 Markwick received a legacy from his aunt Olive, on condition that he changed his surname to hers, which he did, although he continued to use the name Markwick on his scientific papers. The legacy was complicated and the legal matters associated with it occupied Markwick's time for some years³.

He eventually achieved the inheritance of Denne Park, which still stands, though much altered. When William Markwick died in 1813 his son Charles continued to live at Catsfield,

where he died in 1818, but his other son James preferred Denne. Catsfield Manor was sold in 1826 to the soldier who was to become Lt Gen Sir Andrew Pilkington KCB (who married the daughter of the heir to Catsfield Place). When he died in 1853 the property passed to his daughter Maria Georgina, who had married Rev Burrell Hayley, the rector of Catsfield, in 1848. Denne remained in the hands of the Eversfield family until 1947 and the Grade II listed building is now developed into apartments.

In due course the Eversfield trust enacted two Acts of Parliament in 1827 and 1837 which enabled the trust to sell land subject to covenants. Much of the land in west Hastings was sold and enabled the development of St Leonards on Sea. Name evidence persists there with roads such as Eversfield Place and the appropriately named Markwick Gardens.



Watercolour illustration of red godwit by William Markwick

The Markwick manuscripts in the Linnean Society archives have now been catalogued and the contents listed. Perhaps they will now be edited in conjunction with the material at Hastings Museum and published, giving William Markwick the recognition he deserves.

**Keith Foord and George Kiloh
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1. Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 36
2. <https://www.linnean.org/results?search=william+markwick>
3. <http://www.ricardophotoalbum.com/archive/eversfields.pdf>
4. Still available in print