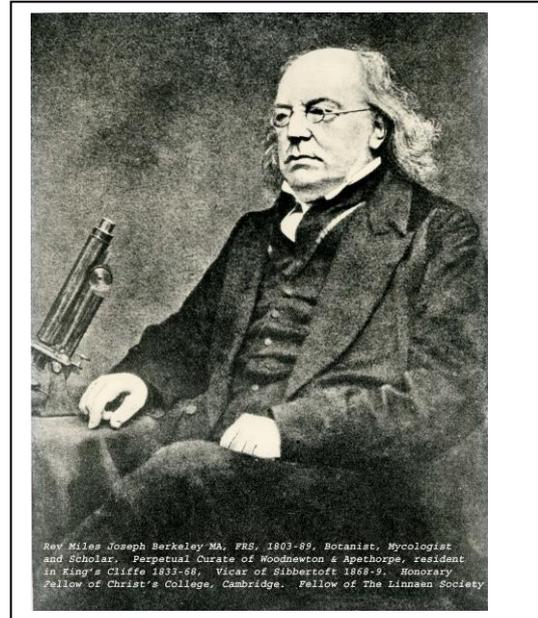


The Revd. Miles Joseph Berkeley, M.A. FLS, FRS, 1803-1889
Paper written in 1980 by Dr Stefan Buczacki.

“It may come as something of a surprise for residents of King’s Cliffe to learn that the name of their village is as familiar to a few thousand people scattered across every country of the world as that of many a great metropolis. These people have never visited Northamptonshire; many have never visited England, but King’s Cliffe is part of their every-day vocabulary. The people to whom I refer are mycologists – those concerned with the scientific study of fungi. Much of what we know about these fascinating organisms is based on the pioneering studies of a handful of 19th Century amateurs. Pre-eminent among these amateurs was none other than the Revd. Miles Joseph Berkeley, perpetual curate of Apethorpe with Woodnewton from 1833 until 1868 and resident during that time in King’s Cliffe. For most of the period he lived in what is now the school in Park Street. As with all naturalists, the stock in trade of the mycologist is his specimens and most of M.J.B.’s specimens were collected in the woods and fields around the village. Carefully described and catalogued, they found their immortality through the scientific literature, always accompanied with the name of the locality where they were collected. Hence the name of King’s Cliffe became spread far and wide.



“But who was this retiring yet so industrious cleric who brought fame to the village? A Northamptonshire man, born and bred of a branch of the famous Gloucestershire Berkeleys, he read Maths at Christ’s College, Cambridge; spent a few brief years as curate at Margate and then returned to his native county where he remained until his death at Sibbertoft in 1889 at the age of 86. He found time for a remarkably full life. In addition to his normal parish duties, he served for a period as Rural Dean and ran a small private school from his house at Cliffe. He was an examiner for London University and for the Royal Horticultural Society and a prodigious writer. Not only did he publish around 400 scientific papers and articles, but also six books. He wrote many many thousands of letters to scientific colleagues all over the world. Only recently one of the most valuable groups of these letters, those to his American mycological protégé, the Revd. M.A. Curtis, turned up in an old shed in a garden in North Carolina. These fascinating documents were not only the medium of exchange of scientific information, but they also provide intriguing glimpses of the life in King’s Cliffe at the time. Others of Berkeley’s letters are now in archives at Kew, Uppsala in Sweden, Prague, Paris and other great libraries.

2Large as it is and was, the house in Park Street clearly bulged at the seams with Berkeley people and Berkeley possessions. Miles fathered fifteen children, of whom thirteen survived (a remarkably high proportion for those day), and the census of 1851 recorded nineteen people in residence, including a cook, a governess, a nursemaid, a housemaid and a footman. Apart from his voluminous correspondence (the letters received by M.J.B. from other scientists are now in the Natural History Museum in London and stretch to thirteen volumes), there was a huge library that required two booksellers’ catalogues to describe it when it was sold after his death, and there were, of course, the specimens. They flowed in to Park Street from wherever Victorian explorers went, for the fungi they collected on their travels were invariably referred to M.J.B. for identification. Ten thousand species new to

science were described by him and the individual specimens were even greater in number. Small wonder that the house seemed crowded at the time!

“Spare a thought when you next pass the school for the botanical power-house it once was; the reference centre of the world for some thirty years in the middle of the 19th Century. And imagine the tall, bespectacled, white-haired and bearded figure of its resident as he greets another distinguished foreign scientist, come to spend a few days with him and discuss mushrooms and toadstools far into the candle-lit night.”

STEFAN BUCZACKI, D. Phil.

Footnote by Sue Trow-Smith

Berkeley's vital discovery in King's Cliffe!

In the 1840s, the spread of potato blight led to a famine in Ireland which killed and displaced millions of people. Nobody understood what caused potato blight until the mystery was unlocked by Miles Joseph Berkeley while he was living in King's Cliffe. In 1845 he studied the progress of potato blight from Belgium, via the Isle of Wight into Ireland and, in the face of many other theories, he concluded that the cause of the blight was a fungus – now known as *Phytophthora infestans*. This is Berkeley's drawing of a potato blighted by the fungus, which was published in the very first Volume of the Royal Horticultural Society Journal in 1846.

