

*OF BITING-MIDGES  
AND BOTANIC LIONS*

*A Thorne publication of 184*

Martin Limbert

Thorne Local History Society  
Occasional Paper No. 22  
1996

## Preface

William Casson, the first resident chronicler of Thorne and its rural hinterland, was born into a local Quaker family in 1796. An account of his life and work in the town was published recently,<sup>(1)</sup> which notes his interests as both an historian and a naturalist. Undoubtedly, his most lasting memorial comprises the three editions of his book *The History and Antiquities of Thorne, with some account of the drainage of Hatfield Chase*. Having appeared in 1829, 1869 and 1874, these remain a standard local reference, over 160 years beyond their first appearance. All three editions, but ironically the later two in particular, are very scarce. There have been two facsimile editions of the 1829 work, the first appearing in 1987<sup>(2)</sup>, and the second, a handsome bound volume, in 1994<sup>(3)</sup>. In addition, the chapter entitled ‘Thorne Turf Moors’, as in the 1869/74 editions, was substantially republished in 1881<sup>(4)</sup>.

There are only two other traced publications which can be directly linked with Wm Casson, both of them associated with Thorne Moors. He

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

established a garden, apparently in the 1830s, on family land to the east of Thorne, at the edge of the moorland. The garden was subsequently developed into a commercial horticultural enterprise by Wm and his brother John Calvert Casson, also of Thorne<sup>(5)</sup>. It was later inherited by John's son, Francis, but did not survive beyond the latter's death in 1888, though some plants did persist, most notably the rhododendrons. The venture was centred on the production of hybrid rhododendrons, and associated activity included the publication of a horticultural stock list, in 1872<sup>(6)</sup>. Copies of the list which were issued in (at least) 1874 had an extra sheet tipped in at the close of the main stock listing. As an example of Thorne's printed ephemera from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this stock list had only survived by chance; its association with Wm Casson gave it added modern impress. It was therefore republished (both the 1872 and 1874 components), together with a short preface, by the Thorne Local History Society in 1993<sup>(7)</sup>. The publication engendered some interest, and added details of a hitherto unknown stock listing to the Royal Horticultural Society's Lindley Library in London, and to its Library at Wisley.

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

A further copy was deposited with the Library & Archives Division at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

The other known ‘Casson’ publication is also, though less directly, associated with what was known as ‘Casson’s Garden’. It may form the only item issued by the Thorne Literary & Scientific Association, apart from its printed annual report sheets<sup>(8)</sup>. With his interests and outlook, it was natural that Wm Casson should be involved with the Association. He served on the administering Committee, and occasionally lectured to the members and their guests. On the occasion of the Association’s sixth anniversary, at its General Meeting of 21<sup>st</sup> January 1842, he presented an address to the assembled company. This, delivered in verse, featured the biting-midges *Culicoides* of Thorne Moors, which he referred to as ‘colicoides punctata’. Wm Casson’s subject was prompted by ‘painful’ memories of an Association ‘party’ at his moorland garden (*vide Tomlinson postea*). He continued with poetic allusions to the botanical interest of Thorne Moors, and in closing, offered

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

his best wishes to ‘our little band’, of which he noted, with characteristic modesty:

...tho’ we make no mighty stir,  
I hope we’re wiser than we were...

The evening was described in detail by the *Doncaster Chronicle, and Farmers’ Journal*<sup>(9)</sup>, under the title ‘Thorne Literary and Scientific Institution as follows:

‘The members and friends of this flourishing and useful institution celebrated its sixth anniversary by a tea party, in the Long Room at that place, on Friday evening last. Upwards of one hundred ladies and gentlemen sat down to partake of the grateful infusion of tea and coffee, and all the necessary and more substantial accompaniments, the provision of which was abundant, and gave universal satisfaction. The room was tastefully decorated with evergreens, interspersed with oranges and artificial flowers, and when lighted up had a delightful effect; the arrangements altogether were of the most perfect kind, and obtained for the gentlemen who carried them into operation much deserved praise. After the

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

tea equipages had been removed, Makin Durham, Esq., the president, called upon the secretary, Mr. Snowden, to read the report of the transactions of the institution for the past year, and its future prospects, which were most cheering; the balance in the hands of the treasurer being more than double that of any preceding year. A vote of thanks was passed to the officers for their past services, and others were elected to act for the year ensuing. The business relative to the institution having been despatched, the chairman, in a brief address, introduced the intellectual feast provided by the committee of management for their guests, by calling upon Mr. Moon, of Thorne, who read an interesting and important paper on ‘The Advantages of Literary Institutions.’ He showed the humanizing effect of education on the mind, and that ignorance is one of the great causes of crime: at the close there was an animated discussion, in which Mr. Moon, the Rev. Mr. Duffield, and the chairman took part. Mr. Snowden, the secretary, was next called upon, who delivered a very pleasing address on ‘The Uses and Advantages of Books.’ He showed the wonderful faculties which the mind possesses,

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

and the imperative necessity of reading and reflection in the cultivation of those faculties; gave a few cautions in the choice of books; and concluded by describing, in glowing terms, the advantages to be derived from a well-selected library. Mr. Foster, solicitor, then rose to controvert some of the arguments adduced respecting the effect a book should have on the mind of the reader, which Mr. Snowdon ably defended. An excellent paper was next read by Mr. Foster, on ‘The present position of Society as compared with that of our Ancestors.’ He gave a lucid description of the intemperate and boisterous revels of the feudal lords in their fortified castles, and the cruel and barbarous manners of their vassals: he then contrasted these with the object of the meeting, and fully showed that

... ‘Ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes,  
Emollit mores, nec sinit esse feros.’<sup>(10)</sup>

The meeting was then addressed by Mr. Duffield, showing, that though man is inferior in corporeal power to many of the animals around him, yet he is able, by the aid of reason, to overcome them, and make them subservient to his more dignified nature. The chairman called

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

upon Mr. William Casson, who read a most instructive paper in verse, on the natural history of the *Colicoides punctate*; and described many of the rare and curious plants which ‘blush unseen’ on the Thorne Moors. The poem throughout excited the greatest interest; and at the conclusion the company unanimously expressed a wish that Mr. Casson would allow it to be printed. Mr. Wrightson, of Thorne, then recited with good effect part of the fifth canto of Sir Walter Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*. As it was now late the chairman rose to bring the business of the evening to a close. Mr. Thomas Brown moved, and Mr. Moon seconded, a vote of thanks to the gentlemen who had superintended the arrangements of the evening. Mr. Foster, in a neat and appropriate address, moved a vote of thanks to the ladies for their kindness in gracing the festal board, which was seconded by Mr. Wells, and carried unanimously. Mr. Duffield proposed, and Mr. Snowdon seconded, a vote of thanks to the chairman, which he briefly acknowledged, and announced that the next lecture would be given on the third Friday in February, by Mr. Duffield, on ‘The Atmosphere,’ after which the meeting separated,

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

highly gratified with the evening's entertainment.

The address was published, in augmented form, with 'Explanatory Notes, and additional verse. The small 32mo book, of 32 pages, was printed by Joseph Mason, whose premises were in the Market Place, Thorne. He was also the printer of the 1869 and 1874 editions of Wm Casson's *History*, and of the 1872 stock list. His predecessor, S. Whaley, had printed the 1829 edition of the *History*. It is not known how many copies of the 1842 book were produced, or if any still survive in and around Thorne. The only one located exists in the British Library, and it is this example which has been used in this republication project. The wording and spelling are repeated *verbatim*. The book reappears 15 decades after it was first issued, and it is fitting that this should be achieved in the year of the bicentenary of Wm Casson's birth.

### Notes

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

1. M. Limbert (1991) William Casson of Thorne. *The Naturalist* **116**: 3-15
2. Malet Lambert [High School, Hull] Local History Reprint Extra Vols Nos **86** and **87**.
3. Published by Mr. Pye (Books), of Howden.
4. *Wrigley's Illustrated Thorne Almanac and Local Companion, For 1882: [Companion to the Thorne Almanac, 1882] [1]-5.*
5. The garden and the commercial enterprise are described in Limbert (1991).
6. *List and Description of Rhododendrons etc., on sale by W. & J. C. Casson, Thorne.* Thorne, 1872.
7. M. Limbert (1993) An Early Horticultural Stock List Published at Thorne. *Thorne Local History Society Occasional Paper No. 12*.
8. Limbert (1991); the surviving sheets post-dated the 1841-42 programme.
9. 28<sup>th</sup> January 1842.

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

10. ‘...a faithful study of the liberal arts humanizes character and permits it not to be cruel’. A quotation from Ovid’s *Epistulae ex Ponto* (II.ix.47-48)

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Douglas H. Kent, OBE, a member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles’ Panel of Referees and Specialists, for providing guidance on three elements of Wm Casson’s poetry and prose. This advice has been incorporated into the section ‘Modern notes on the text’. Other help has been received from Michael Metford-Sewell, and Jean and Russell Mortimer, particularly with the quotation from Ovid.

Gratitude is also due to Helen R. Kirk for word-processing the entire script.

Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

**AN ADDRESS**

READ AT A TEA PARTY MET IN THE

**LONG ROOM**

ON THE

SIXTH ANNIVERSARY AND  
GENERAL MEETING

OF THE

**THORNE LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC  
ASSOCIATION,**

JANUARY 21<sup>st</sup>, 1842

BY W. CASSON

THE PROFITS TO BE APPLIED IN AID OF THE  
FUNDS OF THE ABOVE INSTITUTION

PRICE 6d.

---

THORNE:

Printed and Published for the Association,  
by J. MASON, Market Place.

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

### [PREFACE]

*WHEN it was proposed that I should furnish a short essay or paper for the present occasion, the query that naturally arose was, Well! What must be the subject? and on recurring to the last party on the Moors, the annoyance suffered from the Midges occurred feelingly to my recollection. I, therefore, thought this a good opportunity for bringing the case of the said Midges before the honourable board of green cloth, now assembled in her Majesty's justice room<sup>(1)</sup>.*

### ADDRESS

*SHALL I begin with – Mr. Chair,  
You, Gentlemen, and Ladies fair,  
On this auspicious night?  
No; that address sounds strangely queer,  
My worthy friends;-- to meet you here  
It gives me great delight.*

*To have this Literary Tea,  
Where we can sit, from the Midges free,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*And their tormenting bite;--  
But then, again, let us suppose  
We had a dozen by the nose  
To hold up to the light;*

*Or rather, we might make them pass  
Beneath a microscopic glass,  
And view their conformation:  
Their little tiny barred wings,  
And prove, perhaps, that they had strings,  
With clearest demonstration.*

*A colicoides punctate<sup>(2)</sup> –  
Let others reason as they may –  
Is called a Midge of taste;  
It is not every one it meets,  
That with a friendly bite it greets,  
With all its bustling haste.*

*This fact, I somewhere once have read,  
And bring it forth without a dread  
Or fear that you will doubt it;  
Indeed, the Ladies, by their smile,  
I judge are thinking all the while,  
They felt enough about it.*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*But, did you note, whilst on the wing,  
This little bustling merry thing  
Move round in short gyrations?  
Now with a quick concentric spin,  
A piullars form they're buzzing in,  
Where each one has its station.*

*'Tis the same motion that they keep,  
They had, ere rising from the deep,  
To revel in the sun;--  
For three warm summer months they stay;  
And then forever pass away;--  
Their short lived race is run.*

*You have viewed the animalcule wheel<sup>(3)</sup>,  
You've heard of polypus<sup>(4)</sup>, and eel  
Electric, the gymnotus<sup>(5)</sup>:  
'Tis said a rather smartish shock,  
A kind of philosophic knock,  
We feel when it has smote us.*

*Humbolt<sup>(6)</sup> declares, that on a plain,  
A distant tributary of Spain,  
Where Oronoco glides,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Is here and there a muddy pool,  
In such our cattle stand to cool,  
But there gymnotii hides.*

*On the parched Llanos by, are found  
Hordes of wild horse, that scour the ground,  
A sleek and noble race:  
The Indians near, collect a troop,  
With many a horrid yell and whoop,  
And drive them to the place;--*

*Dash in the pool, with ruthless force,  
They send each wildly trembling horse,  
Among the electric fry;  
The eels enraged, with shock on shock,  
Soon so benumb the madden'd stock,  
They have not power to fly.*

*With furious plunge, in tumult dire,  
With heaving flank, and eye on fire,  
They wrestle in the strife;  
But madden'd kick and plunge are vain,  
Dishevell'd is each flowing mane,  
They sink, and yield up life<sup>(7)</sup>.*

*An eel of this electric sort,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*At least the papers so report,  
Has been conveyed to town<sup>(8)</sup>:  
It is a kind of speculation,  
That sometimes answers in this nation,  
When to the curious shown.*

*And hundreds go, I understand,  
And shillings pay, without the Strand,  
To test this eel's benumbing;  
Now, don't you think, if we could bring  
Them just to feel our Midges' sting,  
And hear their cheerful humming;*

*That they would wish to have the prize  
That is so worthless in our eyes,  
And which we well can spare?  
If some joint-stock the funds should raise,  
To purchase Midges for their gaze,  
I'd freely sell my share.*

*Perhaps you're laughing at the scheme –  
But pray of what now can you dream,  
Of which no shares are sold?  
They talk of saw-dust making deal,  
And mines are working at Villa Real<sup>(9)</sup>  
For not a grain of gold.*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Where grow the stately banyan trees  
Are hospitals for feeding fleas<sup>(10)</sup>,  
Of which perhaps you've heard;--  
So that, I beg you will allow,  
From these sage reasons that I show,  
The thing is not absurd.*

*Yet, as I said,-- if 'neath the glass  
We make the little creature pass,  
What lessons we may read!  
Its wondrous structure there defined,  
Will shew the truly thinking mind  
Provision for each need.*

*The eyes, the legs, the wings, the feet,  
How delicate! yet how complete,  
In the minutest part!  
Nay, e'en the head with plumes is drest,  
For it has donned a summer vest  
Beyond the reach of art.*

*If thus, indeed, we nature view,  
We find her charming, ever new,  
Something that clearly shows  
We hold communion day or night*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*With Him, who is the source of light,  
From whence each blessing flows.*

*Thus scientific art and aid,  
A really useful source is made  
Of pleasure and instruction;  
And minds that with such feelings swell,  
Have caught the true masonic spell,  
And ask no introduction.*

*The busy world perhaps may smile,  
And think what trifles will beguile  
Men of superior parts;  
But nature's book is closely sealed,  
And all her beauties unrevealed,  
If mammon fill their hearts.*

*In common intercourse 'tis said,  
In politics, as well as trade,  
Sincerity, how rare!  
But nature's votaries feel not this,  
Their's is a boundless source of bliss,  
That all their friends may share.*

*To point our beauties in each race,  
Their various conformations trace,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Though endless does not pall,  
When from the heart we truly say,  
To all the wonderful array,  
‘My Father made them all.’*

*In one essay that we have heard,  
My worthy friend has there referred,  
Alone to what is printed<sup>(11)</sup>,  
Books are of use undoubtedly,  
Those at the least from errors free,  
And prizable, as hinted.*

*And yet, perhaps, he will excuse,  
If I advise you to peruse  
Nature herself as well;  
Your medium then is pure and real,  
You copy not what others feel,  
But judge if truth they tell.*

*Besides, the knowledge that you gain  
You earn; and therefore will retain,  
Though trifling it may seem;  
But least I should your patience tire,  
And which I really don’t desire,  
I now will change the theme.*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Thus writes a friend, which I transpose  
To simple rhyme, from sober prose,  
As now it suits me better:--  
'Should you again more lions find,  
'I mean of the botanic kind,  
'Pray send them in a letter.*

*'And do not fail to watch at spring,  
'And let a line the tidings bring,  
'When Scheuchzias<sup>(12)</sup> are in flower,  
'And I will come and trace the moor,  
'A pleasure I enjoyed before,  
'If then within my power.*

*'But if that pleasure is denied,  
'I make this one request beside,  
'You'll get a case of tin,  
'That you can forward by the post,  
'T will cost a sixpence at the most,  
'With the Scheuchzerias in.*

*'The grass-like plant you sent me last  
'Has almost set the learned fast;  
'However 'tis a sedge,<sup>(13)</sup>--  
'One calls it carex remota:  
'Another says, 'tis carex a --*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*'But which he can't allege.*

*'Some specimens I sent to town,  
'Part to a person not unknown --  
'The English Flora's Editor  
'I still have friends I would supply,  
'And hope I shall do, by and by,  
'When I am next your creditor.'*

*I really feel a little pride,  
Whilst thus transporting far and wide  
The natives of our peat;  
That these as lions, too, are deemed,  
By men for talents much esteemed,  
Is quite a pleasant treat.*

*I think it, too, is only fair,  
That you with me, this pleasure share,  
My scientific friends;  
For well I know, you also feel  
An interest in the cause's weal,  
And what that cause extends.*

*'Tis now six years, our little band  
Have met at times, you understand,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*And much has been explained;  
And tho' we make no mighty stir,  
I hope we're wiser than we were,  
From knowledge thus obtained.*

*That we may still the interest keep,  
And further fruit from science reap,  
With each succeeding year;  
And now we enter forty-two,  
Best wishes I may offer you,  
And thanks that are sincere.*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

### EXPLANATORY NOTES.

On the East side of the town, and at a distance of two miles in a direct line from the Church, is an extensive morass, called *Thorne Waste*, covering upwards of eight thousand acres. The base of this peat moss is a submerged forest, consisting of splendid specimens of the Old English Oak, now rendered as hard and black as ebony, by the combination of oxide of iron abounding in the clayey soil, with the galic acid of the Oak; Fir – still in many instances sound enough to be used for roofs or to split into laths – Yew, Ash, much decomposed, and Birch; the bark of the latter may still be seen as bright and fresh as when first thrown down: it appears almost imperishable, although the wood when exposed to the air crumbles to powder.

The peat next above the trees is composed of the fibres and leaves of aquatic plants interspersed with floated leaves, nuts, acorns, &c., to a considerable depth, in thin layers, each the produce of one year's vegetation: these thin plates may be readily separated from each other,

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

and show as clearly as the rings in timber, the ages that have elapsed since its formation.

It is interesting to divide these lamina, and to admire the different plants that comprise this accumulation of vegetable matter, in depth varying from eight to ten, fifteen and even twenty feet. The mind is imperceptibly carried back to bygone ages, and lost in wonder at the result of the silent and almost imperceptible workings of nature.

### *THORNE WASTE*

*A forest huge, of lordly oak and pine –  
That rear'd, in ages past, their stately heads,  
Revelling in sunbeams, prostrate now and rent,  
With clammy sedge enwrapt, here darksome  
lies;  
While, year by year, the parasitic moss,  
With inroad imperceptible, has rais'd  
A desert mound above them, cold, and soft  
To the touch, as snow; like marble, ever  
during,  
Tho' plastic: hence, in ages yet to come,*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Shall passers by, in desolate silence, note  
This drear vast tomb of buried majesty.  
As tiny corals, thro' the Western wave,  
Have isles uprear'd; where the tall cocoa  
spreads*

*In fan-like beauty; so soft sphabnum here,  
With giant oak contending, still o'ertops it,  
And proves itself more lasting. Thus doth*

*Nature*

*Her wonders work, and by how little means!*

The upper portion of the peat is almost entirely formed of the *Sphagnum palustre*<sup>(14)</sup>, tops of whose branchlets vegetate annually, whilst the lower part of the stems are turning brown and quiescent, and forming the substance called peat: -- it is antiputrescent and almost imperishable.

The surface of the peat is generally covered with *Erica tetralix*, *Erica vulgaris*, *Andromeda polyfolia*, and other plants indigenous to moist situations. The *Drosera rotundifolia*, *anglica*, and *longifolia* are here seen in perfection<sup>(15)</sup>, and some specimens may also be obtained of the *Scheuchzeria palustre*, the least flowering rush, a

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

plant only to be found in one or two other similar situations in England.

On the morass are several ponds, the resort of wild fowl; some of these are extremely curious both in shape and situation. The water, clear and dark coloured, is free from weeds, and with nothing floating upon it, save perhaps the curled white feather of some bird, that glides across like a fairy boat, or dances on the wavelets in one of the little bays. The margins are beautifully fringed with the finest moss and flowering heath, and are nearly on a level with the surface of the water, whilst in their outlines may be found every possible form of natural elegance; indeed some of them would be considered quite gems were they transported to the cultivated parterre or public garden.

At the edge of the morass already described is a small plantation of Larch, and immediately adjoining it is an experimental Garden<sup>(16)</sup>, which a year or two ago was kept in very neat order, and attracted a good deal of attention, not only from the novelty of its situation, but also for the beauty and vividness of colouring in the flowers

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

it produced, amongst which may be mentioned those of the Rose; the Rhododendrum; Fuchsias; Deutzias; Salvias, scarlet purple and patans<sup>(17)</sup>; Rhodanthe Manglesii<sup>(18)</sup>; Nymphillas<sup>(14)</sup>; and many other choice plants for which a peat soil is favourable.

On a dark brown bank of peat, forming the northern wall or boundary of the garden, were depicted a small zoological collection, each animal being represented nearly as large as life, in variously coloured sphagnum and other mosses thrust into the peat: amongst the number were a white bear, a lioness, tiger, leopard, lynx, dog, and stag; and, which, considering the substance of which they were constructed, were allowed to be pretty correct likenesses of the animals they represented, especially in the outlines; the shading of course could not be rendered very faithfully, but the figures being considerably in relief, this defect was in part obviated;-- the eyes were of glass: the whole at least might claim the merit of original invention. In one corner of the garden there issued from the peat a small rill, above which was inserted, in white moss, the word '*Temperance,*' and to this

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

rill many a pilgrimage was made. We are sorry to add that a severe frost has nearly destroyed the whole of the peat wall we have been describing, along with its adornments.

Under the shade of the trees in the garden is a small arbour, the roof and sides of which are composed almost entirely of Ling (*Erica vulgaris*); also several rustic seats are placed about in different directions, for the accommodation of visitors. Here, in the summer season parties have frequently been assembled to take tea. The neat tea services used on those occasions were purchased by subscription a year or two ago, and generously presented by the Ladies of Thorne<sup>(20)</sup>.

These parties and excursions on the moors will no doubt be long and pleasantly remembered by many, and the reading of this note may perhaps bring most vividly to their recollection, scenes and situations both on and in the peat that have tended much to enliven the company.

Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*LINES ON VISITING THE GARDEN  
AT THE MOORS.*

*A garden planted in a wild,  
A choice, and favour'd spot,  
Where savage natures mute and mild  
Are met, and ravin not.*

*Hard by the whisker'd leopard's lair  
The peaceful lambkin plays;  
And the grim tiger's eyeballs glare,  
While hinds beside them graze.*

*Rich flowers within the garden's space  
Are pleasant to the sight;  
And parted streams around the place,  
Fence, soothe, refresh, delight:*

*All fair to view is here supplied;  
All framed, repose to make;  
Save that, upon a bank I spied  
Coil'd up, the envenom'd snake.*

*Now, memory prompting, should a scene  
From this faint image rise,  
Its prototype in what has been*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*‘Mong high realities;*

*Let reverential awe forbear  
More closely to pursue  
The solemn likeness, nor compare  
Primeval things with new.*

*Only in calm and quiet thought  
Let the warn’d spirit hear:  
‘Keep thyself, Christian; and be taught  
‘Midst healthiest joys to fear.’*

The visitors to the moors in early autumn, when there is no wind, may however at times suffer a little annoyance from the Midges, or Men of Wroot<sup>(21)</sup>, as they are sometimes called; the colicoides punctate: these diminutive [diminutive] pests are little aquatic insects which enter into the winged state in the warm months; and, on still evenings, rise in such immense numbers and are so irritating as frequently to oblige the labourers to give up their work unfinished, and leave the moor to escape their torment. – A person who has not experienced the annoyance that so small a creature, not larger

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

than a pin's head, can occasion, has no idea of the plague that must be endured, when the weather is hot, both the hands occupied, and the face, ears and neck, exposed to the operations of the tens of thousands of these tormentors. On the occasion referred to in the address, the party at the garden had just finished tea, when the westerly wind which had blown in the afternoon gradually lulled, the Midges then rose in force, and soon obliged the company to retire and leave them undisputed masters of the field; not, however, without some regret at being thus unceremoniously intruded upon.

The oak found on the moor is principally used for park paling, for which purpose it is very durable; and notwithstanding the centuries that it has been buried, and the consequent reduction in its bulk, trees are yet found of very considerable size: a thousand pales, four feet in length, are stated to have been obtained from a single tree. In a corner of the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey, in the Museum Garden at York, is a section of one brought from this neighbourhood, which for size, grain, and closeness of fibre, is a good specimen of the native oak. The roots that are

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

dug up are frequently used for a kind of rustic fencing, and when well put together are both neat and lasting; -- some of them represent the heads of animals, and even animals themselves, and when seen in the dusk may readily be construed by the timid into unearthly objects. We know a boy that was terribly frightened by a root on the moor.

The district of the moors alluded to in the preceding notes, has undergone an astonishing change within the period of twenty years; from the improved state of the drainage, and a corresponding advancement in the state of cultivation that has consequently followed the lands been made available for tillage<sup>(22)</sup>. Prior to the period before named, large flats were covered with rushes, and subject annually to be overflowed with water, which are now in many instances rendered highly productive, and are capable of still further improvement: besides, on the edge of the morass that was formerly quite denuded of trees, except a few Birch, which grow any where, and which Professor Wilson<sup>(23)</sup> says ‘are so lady-like in their tresses in whatever situation they are placed,’ there are now

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

numerous small Plantations of Larch, Oak, &c. (the growth of which is exceedingly rapid), starting up in many directions; these not only improve the appearance of the country, but also break the force of the cold easterly winds, and prevent the circulation, and spread over the lower lands of the seeds of mosses and lichens from the morass, which are considered equally injurious both to grass and grain.

From the submerged state of the district formerly, it has been queried, how the large trees found buried under the peat could thrive in so low and wet a soil, but it seems pretty certain that at the time that this noble forest was in its prime, the land was relatively higher than it is at present, and that it is the beds of the rivers, their banks, and the lands adjoining, under the influence of warp that have caused the district we are now describing to assume its present sunken appearance; a similar rising of the bed of the river, and consequent depression of the surrounding country, is noted in the Ganges, the Mississippi, the Orinoco, and other large rivers that flow through flat districts.

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

No land so quickly shows the effect of tillage as a peaty soil; on the other hand, without artificial manure it is nearly unproductive. It is interesting to notice the almost instinctive power of plants and trees growing in this friable soil, in finding out sufficient nourishment to support their rapid growth. If a load of manure, or heap of rich earth be thrown down and left unmoved for a time, roots will be found to have travelled from astonishing distances, and in all directions, to benefit by the richer pasture.

‘In one essay,’-- *Page 13.*

At the General Meeting three Essays were read previously to this address

On ‘The advantages of Literary Institutions.’

‘The uses and advantages of Books.’

And on ‘The present position of Society as compared with that of our Ancestors.’

At the General Meeting of the Thorne Literary and Scientific Institution, held in the Long Room, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1842,

*Moved* by Mr. DURHAM,

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Seconded* by Mr. BROWN,

‘That the address now read by Mr. CASSON, be printed, and sold at sixpence per copy; and that the profits arising from the sale thereof be given to aid the funds of the Institution.’

W. SNOWDEN, Hon. Sec.

MODERN NOTES ON THE TEXT

Note 1

The Thorne Literary & Scientific Association met in the Long Room of the Red Lion Inn, Finkle Street. The room was then also used as a courtroom. Wm Casson's reference to the 'honorable board of green cloth' is not entirely clear. It was presumably a parody of the Board of Green Cloth, an ancient institution of the royal household. This, also known as the counting house, was presided over by the lord steward who, with the cofferer and others, controlled expenditures and made the necessary provisions for the household. However, Casson's parallel was perhaps nothing more than the existence at that time of a green cloth on the courtroom table in the Red Lion.

Note 2

The origin of the usage of this name by Wm Casson is not certain. Only a very few of the 48 British species of these minute flies bite man,

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

one of the most widespread being the so-called Garden Midge *Culicoides obsoletus* (Mg.). *Vide*:

J. Boorman (1986) British *Culicoides* (Diptera: Ceratopogonidae): Notes on distribution and biology. Ent. Gaz. 37: 253-266.

*C. obsoletus* is the only species recorded by entomologists from Thorne Moors. It is almost certain that Casson's taxon, and *C. obsoletus*, are the same species.

### Note 3

A reference to rotifers Rotifera, once known as 'wheel animalcules'. They were a popular subject with freshwater microscopists.

### Note 4

In this context, the cuttlefish Sepiida, or octopus Octopoda, but probably the latter, which was given the name 'polypus' by Aristotle.

### Note 5

The Electric Eel *Electrophorus electricus*, once placed in the genus *Gymnotus*, is a native of the

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

Orinoco and Amazon rivers. When electrically active, its full charge can severely shock a man, and be lethal to smaller fishes. This ability is used to obtain some of the Eel’s food, though its electric power is also employed as a defensive mechanism.

### Note 6

Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), German naturalist and explorer, who travelled through the Orinoco basin in 1800. He was in Central and South America from 1799–1804, and subsequently devoted many years to the publication of his American data. The ‘Llanos’ (Spanish: plains), referred to in the following verse, and wide grasslands drained by the Orinoco and its western tributaries.

### Note 67

The most accessible English version of Humboldt’s original description of the electrocution of the horses is contained in:

Alexander von Humboldt (1852) *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*of America, During the Years 1799-1804. Vol. II*  
Henry G. Bohn: London.

### Note 8

Information about the Electric Eel to which Wm Casson remarked is found in the Doncaster newspapers of 1<sup>st</sup> April 1842, not long after Casson's address. *The Doncaster, Nottingham, and Lincoln Gazette* was the most expansive:

The electrical eel at the Royal Adelaide Gallery died on Monday morning. It was well known to all the visitors. It had been ill for a week, but it was not until Thursday last that there was any striking difference observable. It became very inactive, and this inactivity increased to torpor. The cause of its death was mortification. It was brought to this country from one of the many tributary streams of the river of the Amazons, about four years ago, and was the only one of its kind in Europe. Its structure was very singular. The seat of the electric power lay between the shoulder and the tail, and between the head and the shoulder. Its food was small fish, which it could stun and stupify by an electric shock at

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

two feet distance. It always stunned and stupified these fish before it ate them. The most interesting and beautiful experiment performed by its electricity was in setting fire to a piece of silver paper in a glass cylinder. One end of a conductor was attached to the paper and the other to the eel, and by this means the paper was burnt. It was necessary that the eel should be irritated before it would send forth electricity. It was young when brought over here, and was blind for some time before its death.

However, it appears that this was not the first such Eel to appear in London.

A clue is contained in:

R. D. Altick (1978) *The Shows of London*.  
Cambridge (Mass.) and London.

In this, the author noted:

One of the huge volumes of handbills, prints, and newspaper clippings relating to London exhibitions that were assembled by the

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

antiquarian Daniel Lysons is encyclopedic on the subject of living creatures alone: elephants, tigers, lions, rhinoceroses, orang-utans, dromedaries, American elk, beavers, bears, hippopotamuses, zebras, chimpanzees, cassowaries, ostriches, pelicans, black swans, vultures, electric eels, grampuses, dogfish, crocodiles, porpoises, sea hogs, whales – the list is almost as long as the whole roster of the then known animal kingdom.

Regrettably, there is no information on the date of the appearance of these earlier ‘electric eels’, or on the possibility of there being more than one exhibition. The only indication of date is slight: Lysons died at the beginning of January 1834. The Eels were therefore exhibited in 1833 or earlier, possibly much earlier; Wm Casson’s Eel appeared c. 1838.

### Note 9

This problematical reference to ‘Villa Real’ has not been convincingly solved. Five places with, or embracing, this name have been traced from Wm Casson’s time. These are Vila Real (a

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

district and its capital in northern Portugal), and three towns or cities with Vil(l)a Real as the first elements of their compound place-names: Vila Real de Santo Antonio (Portugal), Vila Real do Sabara (Brazil) and Villa Real da Praia Grande (also Brazil). None has an obvious connection with mines worked ‘For not a grain of gold’. However, Vila Real do Sabra, now known simply as Sabara, was founded as a gold mining centre in 1711, and was elevated to city status in 1838, three years or so before Casson’s address.

### Note 10

An explanation of this allusion can be gained from:

B. Lehane (1969) *The Compleat Flea*. London.

The author notes the flea’s ‘unique achievement to have run the gaunt of abuse and invective and to emerge, here and there, as an object of veneration’. He cites, for example, the popular oriental ideas of reincarnation, and of all living things – even fleas – having souls. Of relevance to Wm Casson’s script, Lehane quotes from L. Bertolotto’s *The History of the Flea; with notes and observations*, which appeared in the 1830s:

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

At Surat, fleas, bugs and other vermin are held in such veneration that they have an hospital endowed, where every night some poor fellow, for hire, suffers himself to be tied down upon a bed and the vermin feast upon his body. In Turkey there is a similar foundation for decayed dogs, an institution less ridiculous than the other.

Gujarat is India's westernmost state. Along its 'palm-fringed coast sliced by frequent banyan-lined rivers', running into the Gulf of Khambhat, are many ancient ports, including Surat at the mouth of the Tapti River. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Surat was the most important port on India's west coast. An English trading post was founded there in 1612, marking the beginning of the British Empire in India.

### Note 11

Of the three essays preceding Wm Casson's address at the meeting, one by W. Snowdon, then Honorary Secretary of the Association, was entitled 'The uses and advantages of Books'. It

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

was to this that Wm Casson alluded. He presumably knew at least some of the details of the evening's programme in advance of the event.

### Note 12

=Scheuchz[er]ias. This was Thorne Moors' rarest plant, *Scheuchzeria palustris*, known as Marsh Scheuchzeria, Least Flowering Rush, and latterly, Rannoch-rush. Its need for a high and constant water level precludes its growth at a site subject to drying out during any part of the year. It is therefore one of the first to be affected by drainage, and has long been eliminated from England. It still survives at Rannoch Moor, in Scotland. *Scheuchzeria* was discovered on Thorne Moors in 1831 by a local miller and botanist, Wm Harrison. At that time, the species was only certainly known from two other English sites, and Thorne Moors became a source of herbarium specimens. Wm Casson acted as both guide and gatherer; it grew on the moorland in the vicinity of his garden. However, extensive drainage works in the 1860s checked the species' survival, and the last specimen was

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

found by a visiting botanist, Dr F. A. Lees, in 1870. *Vide*:

M. Limbert (1987) Materials for a history of botanical investigation on Thorne Moors. *The Naturalist* **112**: 117-124.

M. Limbert (1990) The Drainage of Thorne Waste in the Nineteenth Century. *Thorne and District Local History Association Occasional Paper No. 5*.

W. A. Sledge (1949) The Distribution and Ecology of *Scheuchzeria palustris* L. *Watsonia* **1**: 24-35.

### Note 13

The name of the friend to whom Wm Casson sent the sedge *Carex* remains speculative, though he seems to have been an established and well-connected botanist, sending specimens of the sedge to ‘The English Flora’s Editor’. The following paper lists early British *Floras*:

G. A. Nelson (1957) British Floras. *Proc. Leeds phil. lit. Soc.* **7(3)**: 17-28.

From this, it seems clear that Wm Casson was referring to Sir James Edward Smith’s *The English Flora*, first published in four volumes

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

1824-28. An examination has been made of copies of this edition, and of the second edition (1828-29); there is no indication of an editor being involved. The latter is probably poetic licence, with the *author*, Sir J. E. Smith, being intended. The sedge in question may indeed have been Remote Sedge *C. remota*, as this species was reliably recorded from Thorne Moors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Vide*:

F. A. Lees (1888) *The Flora of West Yorkshire. Bot. Ser. Trans Yorks. Nat.*

*Un Vol. 2.*

### Note 14

There is no evidence that Wm Casson ever had more than a rudimentary knowledge of bryophytes. His term ‘*Sphagnum palustre*’ may simply have been used in its original all-embracing Linnaean sense, though several *Sphagnum* taxa were differentiated by 1842. This approach had apparently already been taken by Wm Peck, when writing about the plants of the Isle of Axholme peatlands. *Vide*:

W. Peck (1815) *A Topographical Account of the Isle of Axholme, being the West Division of the*

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

*Wapentake of Manley, in the County of Lincoln.*  
Vol. I (only volume issued). Doncaster.

In this, under the title ‘*Plants of no known Use*’,  
he included ‘*Sphagnum Palustre* L. Bog moss’.

### Note 15

The species referred to here are respectively  
Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*, Heather  
*Calluna vulgaris* (often known locally as Ling),  
Bog-rosemary *Andromeda polifolia*, Round-  
leaved Sundew *Drosera rotundifolia*, Great  
Sundew *D. anglica* and Oblong-leaved Sundew  
*D. intermedia*.

### Note 16

This is the garden established by Wm Casson,  
probably in the 1830s, and which was later  
expanded to form the horticultural enterprise.  
The garden lay in 1km square 7213, and is now  
farmland adjoining the surviving moor. The only  
known representation of the garden appears on  
the following map:

Ordnance Survey six inches scale County Series  
Yorkshire Quarter Sheet 266NE; surveyed 1849-  
52, published 1853.

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

### Note 17

The word ‘patans’ can be equated with patens, which indicates a spreading form.

### Note 18

Now *Helipterum manglesii*.

### Note 19

The identity of ‘Nymphillas’ has remained elusive. There is no such plant genus, and the name is therefore presumably erroneous.

### Note 20

*Vide* also:

J. Tomlison (1882) *The Level of Hatfield Chace and Parts Adjacent*. Doncaster.

He referred to the garden thus:

That Thorne people might delight themselves in beauty, [Wm Casson] planted a garden on the edge of these moors, in which grew most luxuriously fuchias, dahlias, rhododendrons, and various other flowering shrubs which delight to suck nutriment from a turfy soil. Beyond the

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

garden was a bank of peat, from eight to ten feet deep, where the ‘graver’ had discontinued his work. On the perpendicular face of this bank WM Casson, who was an artist by nature, had engraved or pricked in variegated moss the forms of animals, which maintained their colours for several years. Here came the *elite* of Thorne to pic-nic; also the yearly meeting of the local ‘Literary and Philosophical Association’ was held here. Besides the garden, the zoological pictures, the broad expanse of moor, the quiet ‘balks’ of semi-cultivated lands, there were huts or alcoves formed of ling, containing rustic seats for rural couples. In one of these little retreats W – C—had pencilled an inscription, which I distinctly remember:--

*‘Ye who come here to laugh and talk,  
To smoke a pipe, or crack a joke,  
I’d have you know ‘tis my desire  
You do not set this place on fire,’ &c.*

The seats were formed like ships’ lockers, to hold crockery, footballs (croquet and lawn-tennis were not then known games), besides a

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

great number of useful and ornamental articles. On special occasions the tea-kettle or cauldron was slung gipsy *a-la-mode*, and heated with turf; albeit many a dainty one did not relish the colour of that moor-water which rushed in stream down the narrow wooden channels out of the spongy peat, and presented very much the appearance of weak small beer. Nevertheless, the taste was not unpleasant; although we were credibly informed that by constant use it would tan the stomach, until the stomach became like leather.

But woe to the human visitors when it happened to be a mild, soft day, with little sun, and no wind, for then midges, *alias* ‘little men o’ Wroot,’ held a court levee. (On one portion of this moor there is now a railway-station, known as ‘Midge-hall.’) No stranger can imagine the immense gathering of those little gnats—there were millions upon millions. There seemed scarce an inch of breathable air but what was peopled by this populous family. And, zounds! how they could bite; it seemed to me then the greatest of living wonders how an insect of such

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

insignificant proportions could inflict such poignant torture. Talk about bites, surely there is nothing in nature so aggravating as the bite of midges. Crush them if you will by thousands, still they come, in endless phalanx, never ceasing. Gauze is the best armour; and thus ladies who had veils and gloves were tolerably protected. Still numbers of the sly rogues would steal under the veils, up the sleeves, into the bosom by the narrowest imaginable crannies. What rubbing and scrubbing there was all round that lovely flesh. Yea, on retiring from the field I have seen beautiful portions of the cuticle uncovered, showing the wounds which had been gained, or rather borne, in that sharp conflict.

### Note 21

This is the earliest known reference to the biting-midges being referred to in the Thorne-Hatfield area as ‘Men of Wroot’. The latter is a village to the south of Hatfield Moors, and this cognomen is still used locally. It is, however, a misnomer, as it is the females, not the ‘Men’, who ‘bite’ (though actually pierce) and suck up the released blood. The exact reason for Wroot is not

## Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

unequivocally established. The term ‘men of Wroot’, or ‘little men of Wroot’, was sometimes misapplied to thrips Thysanoptera, otherwise known locally as ‘cornflies’ and ‘thunderflies’. This confusion is also still prevalent.

### Note 22

These changes were catalysed by the Thorne, Hatfiels & Fishlake Enclosure Act of 1811 (Award 1825).

### Note 23

There were many ‘botanical’ Wilsons around at the time that Wm Casson was writing, but none of them achieved the status of Professor. It is therefore likely that ‘Professor Wilson’ had interests outside botany, and this has rendered his identification more arduous. Thus far he has remained enigmatic.

# Of Biting–Midges and Botanic Lions

Published by Thorne Historical Society  
Supported by Thorne Moorends Regeneration Project  
2014