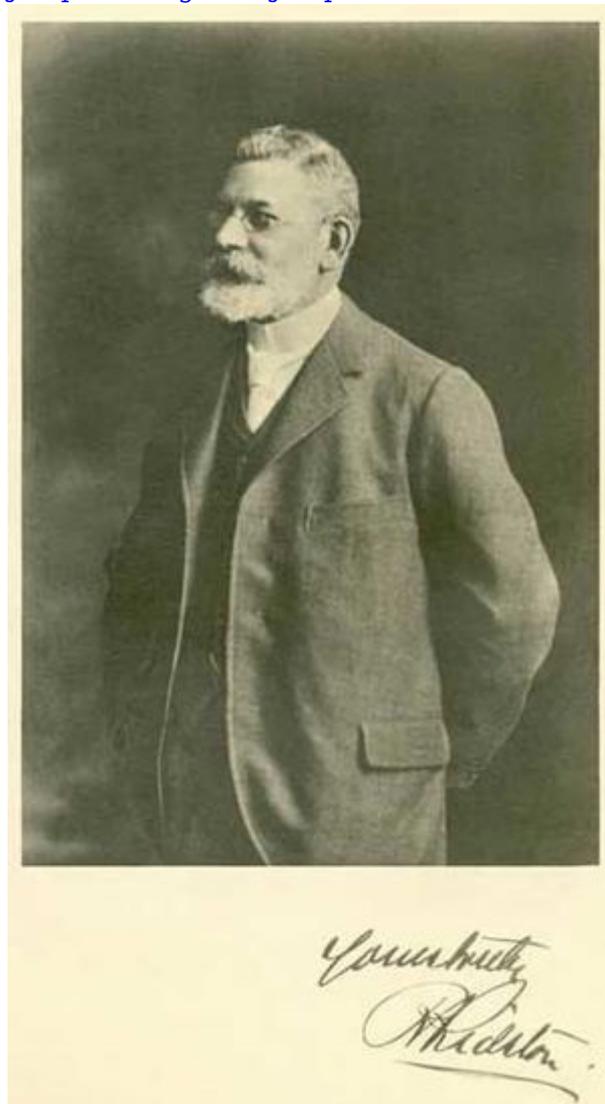


# Robert Kidston - biographical information

From Earthwise

[Jump to navigation](#) [Jump to search](#)



Robert Kidston, FRS, FRSE LLD 1852-1924.  
Kidston in his house at Clarendon Place,  
Stirling.

□

## Contents

- [1 Robert Kidston — new science from a classic collection](#)
- [2 Early years](#)
- [3 Using the fossil plant collection today](#)
- [4 Kidston the man](#)
- [5 References](#)

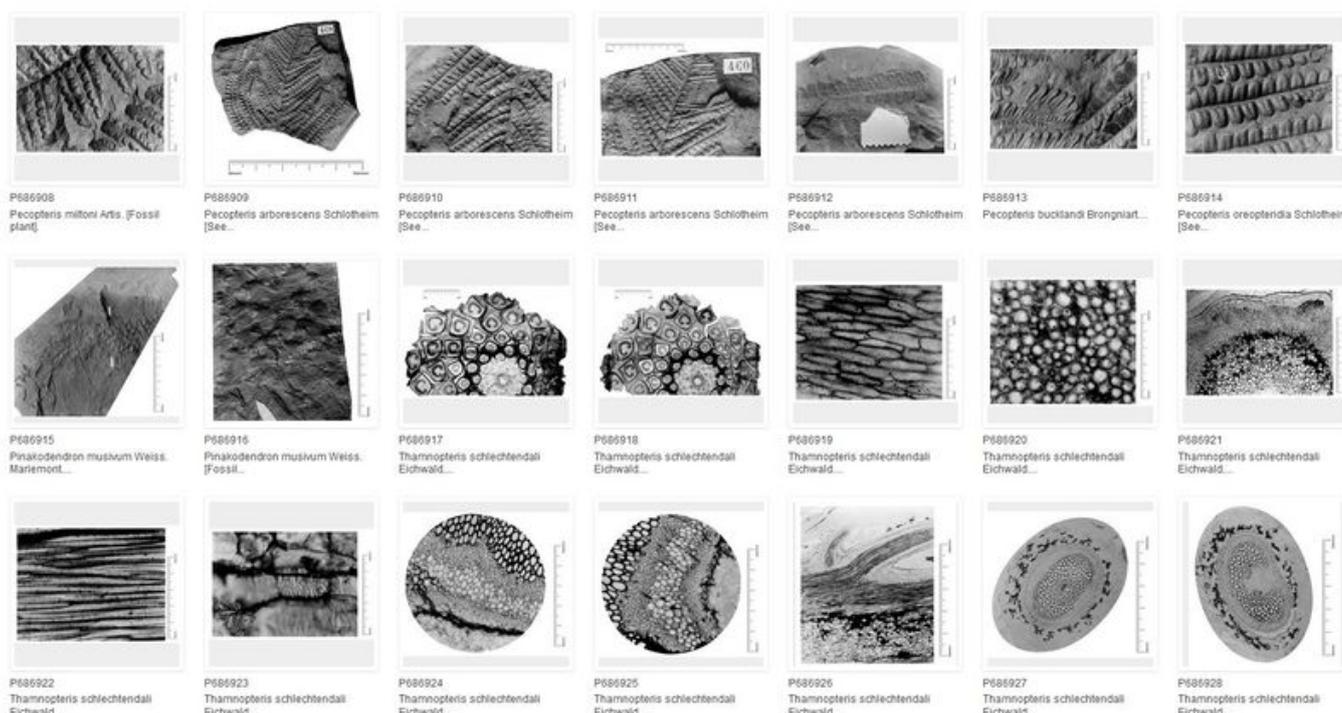
## Robert Kidston — new science from a classic collection

Robert Kidston FRS, one of the great palaeontologists of the Geological Survey, was also an example

of the 'gentleman scientist'. After years of self-financed studies into the fossil plants of the Carboniferous, he bequeathed a huge collection of fossils to the BGS in 1925.

Fossil plants are useful in reconstructing ancient environments and atmospheres. Kidston's collection of fossil plants has recently been used by scientists to better understand climate change and environments 300 million years ago.

Kidston's collection has enabled climate scientists to study the best fossil material without having to collect further samples. Despite the age of the collection, information about the locations where the fossils were found is very comprehensive, reflecting Kidston's obsessive attention to detail.



A sample of the 3600 glass plate photographs taken by Kidston. [Robert Kidston's photographic collection of Carboniferous plants on GeoScenic](#)

## Early years

Kidston was born in 1852 in Renfrew near Glasgow. His wealthy father had businesses in Glasgow, but the family moved to Stirling when Robert was a child.

He was educated at Stirling High School and then began a career as a clerk in the Glasgow Savings Bank. The bank closed in 1878, by which time his father had died and he had inherited a large sum of money.

Financially secure, Kidston was able to devote his time to scientific research and attended the University of Edinburgh to study botany under Sir Hutton Balfour, where he obtained a first class certificate and a medal in practical botany in 1879 and 1880.

Kidston's self-financed studies followed his scientific interests into the field of Carboniferous fossil plants, photography and palaeontological illustration. In 1880 he began a long association with the BGS acting as a voluntary plant palaeontologist, but in later years was awarded many prizes as well as being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1902.

Inspirational palaeontologists such as Gwynne-Vaughan, Lang, Nathorst and Zalesky of Russia were regular visitors to Kidston's large house in Stirling. He always greeted his visitors at Stirling railway station smoking a large white pipe. After introductions to the family and tea, the men would move to the new wing that Kidston added to his house, described by Lang as a museum, study, laboratory and dark room all rolled into one.

Kidston is most famous today for his huge collection of nearly 8000 Carboniferous plant fossils, most of these specimens have been registered in the BGS National Archive of Geological Photographs. There are also around 3600 glass plate negatives which are available to view online in the BGS online photographic archive, GeoScenic.

## **Using the fossil plant collection today**

The collection fills over 400 drawers in the BGS fossil museum, and for many years its value was largely overlooked. However, a resurgence in geological climate change research in recent years has meant that professionally curated collections of well-preserved fossils have special value.

British researchers using Kidston's collection have, for example, been able to assess the density of minute stomata on fossil leaf surfaces and thus estimate levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide 300 million years ago. These estimates can be fed directly into climate change models and help predict future change in which concentrations of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, are an important element.

Palaeobotanists from the Czech Republic have also visited the BGS museum and they have been able to liberate spores trapped in the organs of fossil plants. Some fossil plants in the collection are so well preserved that their sporangia, or spore-bearing structures, are still intact and unopened after 300 million years.

The Czech researchers have taken the sporangia and opened them chemically, liberating the spores. The study of the newly released spores and their parent plants, which are mainly extinct, has helped geologists reconstruct the coal swamp forests of the Carboniferous in great detail.

## **Kidston the man**

As well as his achievements in science, Kidston was also very active as a magistrate, in the politics of the local burghs and in the Church of Scotland. He worked well into his later years and regularly visited colleagues throughout Britain and abroad.

It was on one of these visits in 1924 that he became very ill and a message was sent to his wife. Mrs Kidston travelled by train overnight and then by taxi, but sadly the taxi driver could not find where Kidston was staying and arrived half an hour after he died.

The many tributes to his generosity and his 'intensely human' nature showed that he was very well liked by all the people around him, and was sorely missed. His superb collection will stand as a lasting memorial to a scientist and fascinating man of his time.

## **References**

Bower, F.O. 1923-24. Obituary - Robert Kidston. Proceedings Royal Society Edinburgh, xlv, pp. 248-252

Chatwin, C.P. 1924. Obituary - Robert Kidston. Naturalist for 1924, pp. 364-366

Crookhall, R. 1938. The Kidston Collection of fossil plants. memoirs of the Geological Survey of Great Britain. London:HMSO

Lang, W.H. 1925. Obituary - Robert Kidston. Proceedings Royal Society , B xcvi, pp. xiv-xxii

Obituary on Dr. R. Kidston. Transaction Geological Society of Glasgow v. 17, part 3 1927. p. 464-465

Scott, D.H. 1924. Obituary - Robert Kidston. Nature cxiv, pp.321-322

Seward, A.C. Obituary - Robert Kidston, LL.D., D.Sc., F.R.S., F.R.S.E., F.G.S. Born 28th June 1852, died 13th July 1923. Geologists Magazine Whole v. 61, part 10 1924. p. 477-479

Wikipedia: [Robert Kidston](#)

Retrieved from

'[http://earthwise.bgs.ac.uk/index.php?title=Robert\\_Kidston\\_-\\_biographical\\_information&oldid=44559](http://earthwise.bgs.ac.uk/index.php?title=Robert_Kidston_-_biographical_information&oldid=44559)'

Category:

- [British geoscientists](#)

## Navigation menu

### Personal tools

- Not logged in
- [Talk](#)
- [Contributions](#)
- [Log in](#)
- [Request account](#)

### Namespaces

- [Page](#)
- [Discussion](#)

### Variants

### Views

- [Read](#)
- [Edit](#)
- [View history](#)
- [PDF Export](#)

## More

## Search

## Navigation

- [Main page](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Random page](#)
- [Help about MediaWiki](#)

## Tools

- [What links here](#)
- [Related changes](#)
- [Special pages](#)
- [Permanent link](#)
- [Page information](#)
- [Cite this page](#)
- [Browse properties](#)

- This page was last modified on 6 December 2019, at 19:05.

- [Privacy policy](#)
- [About Earthwise](#)
- [Disclaimers](#)

