

OF SCROOGE AND SNOWDROPS

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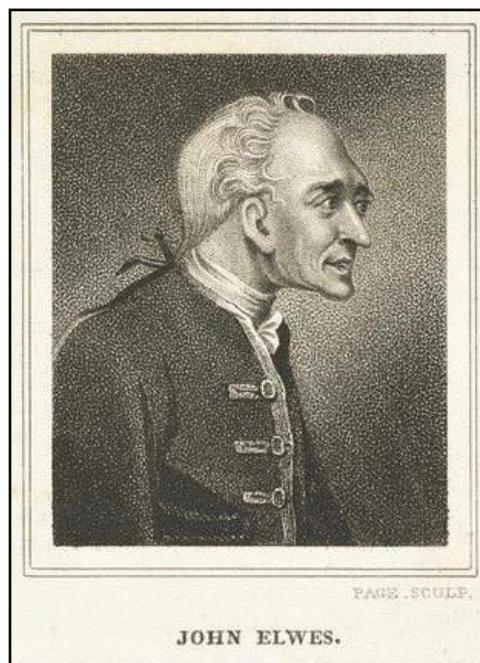
Many years ago, when my interest in snowdrops was relatively new, I made the journey from Devon up to Colesbourne Park in Gloucestershire on one of their open days, to admire their wonderful collection of snowdrops, so beautifully displayed, and hopefully buy some new snowdrop treasures to add to my collection. I remember being entranced by the displays of *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott' en masse, and returned home with a few little gems for my own garden.

Not long afterwards, I started to read more and became increasingly interested in *Galanthus* species and also in the history of snowdrops and the people connected with them. This was before the current phase of 'galanthomania' had really taken hold, and the internet was still in its infancy. The name of *G. elwesii* arrested my attention and I suspected there had to be a connection with the family name of Elwes, the family who own Colesbourne, but I knew no more than this until I read a newspaper article about a 'Miser Elwes' who really took scrimping and penny-pinching to its extremes.

Intrigued by this revelation, I emailed John Grimshaw, who was then in charge of the snowdrop collection at Colesbourne, to ask if there was a connection and if so, what was it? I was rather taken aback to get a cheery message back from the current Colesbourne incumbent, Henry Elwes himself, to confirm that he was indeed connected with Miser Elwes, whose money had provided the wherewithal for his ancestor - also Henry Elwes (1846-1922) - to gad about the world in search of many things; big game, unusual trees, birds and fine plants. It was this Henry Elwes (actually the son of Miser Elwes) who grew the first plants of *G. elwesii*.

There can be few better examples of wealth not buying happiness than the story of the unbelievably wealthy but unbelievably stingy John Elwes, the man widely credited with being the inspiration for Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Elwes, born John Meggot in 1714, seems to have learnt his penny-pinching ways from his family. His mother inherited approximately £100,000 when his father died in 1718, but reputedly starved herself to death because she was too mean to fork out on such things as personal well-being. However, the greatest influence on John's character was his desire to impress his baronet uncle, Sir Harvey Elwes. John was an extravagant youth until he began to curry favour with his rich uncle with an eye on his fabulous fortune. The two men would rail at the extravagance of others, while sharing a single glass of wine. John even changed his surname from Meggot to Elwes in 1751. Many years later, John was duly bequeathed his uncle's entire fortune of £250,000; somewhere in excess of £500 million today.

True to type, John set about not spending his wealth by embarking on a breathtakingly skinflint lifestyle. He would sit in the kitchen with his servants to save lighting a fire in another room, and refused to pay anything for maintenance and repairs to any of his homes. He went for months at a time in the same suit of clothes, which he also wore in bed. A tatty wig was picked out of a hedge, and much walking was done in the rain to avoid paying for a coach, and then he would sit in wet clothes to avoid the expense of a fire to dry them. He ate mouldy food and once, reputedly, ate a rotten moorhen that he took from a rat. A favourite story recounts how Elwes once cut both legs badly while walking home in the dark, but would only allow the apothecary to treat one, wagering his fee that the untreated limb would heal first. He won this bet by a fortnight!



In 1772, Elwes was elected MP for Berkshire and needed to make regular journeys to London. These he did on an emaciated horse, by a roundabout route to avoid turnpike tolls, and he would allow himself just one hard-boiled egg to sustain him on the journey. After twelve years, he gave up his seat, doubtless tiring of the outrageous financial demands on the purse of a politician. He then immersed himself in full-time miserliness until his death in 1789, by which time he left a fortune of about £500,000 (about £1 billion today) to two sons, born out of wedlock. However, it must be said that he did at least put some of his money to good use. Fine Georgian architecture in areas of London like Marylebone, Piccadilly, Baker Street and Portman Square was financed by this man who inspired fiction's greatest miser.

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