

## **William Gordon Stables (1837-1910)**

**Vice President of The Caravan Club 1907-1910**

**Founder of Leisure Touring Caravanning**

William Gordon Stables was born at Aberchirder, Banffshire, in 1837, the son of a one-time merchant, innkeeper and farmer.

As a child he loved to wander free in the countryside and developed a deep love of nature. He was educated at village schools and Aberdeen Grammar School, from where he progressed to Marischal College, Aberdeen University, to read theology.

Unable to face the responsibilities of the pulpit, he transferred to medicine and graduated as an MD in 1862.

He had nurtured aspirations to join the Army and at the close of the Crimean War, when still a boy, had been offered a commission by Lord Hardinge. The offer was on condition that his mother would permit him to take the commission, but she did not.



**Figure 1: Dr William Gordon Stables**

Gordon Stables described himself as a born wanderer and, while still a student, travelled twice to the Arctic. During the first trip his vessel became stuck in pack ice and was reported lost. He returned home to be met by his father and sister dressed in deep mourning. "Which of the family is dead?", he asked apprehensively. "You are" was the reply!

On graduation from Aberdeen Gordon Stables went to London with the intention, once again, of joining the Army. He ran out of money but was too proud to ask his father for more. Royal Navy exams came round before those for the Army and his poverty caused him to take the first chance. He was commissioned as an Assistant Ship Surgeon in February 1863 to the 39-gun frigate *Narcissus*.

He harboured literary ambitions and his naval experiences encouraged him to write his first book *Medical Life in the Navy*. This is possibly the only surviving work that detailed shipboard life from a medical perspective during the transition period from sail power to steam. However, officers were not supposed to write of service matters and in consequence he was overlooked for appointment to HMS Captain. This proved lucky, as shortly afterwards she turned over in the Bay of Biscay and all hands were lost.

He later saw service in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the seas off West Africa. While off Africa he took part in suppressing the slave trade and apparently led "a most piratical life". So-called 'jungle fever' invalidated him home in 1871 on half pay. He then served in the Merchant service for two years, during which he travelled around the world twice and gained first-hand experience of South America and Australia.

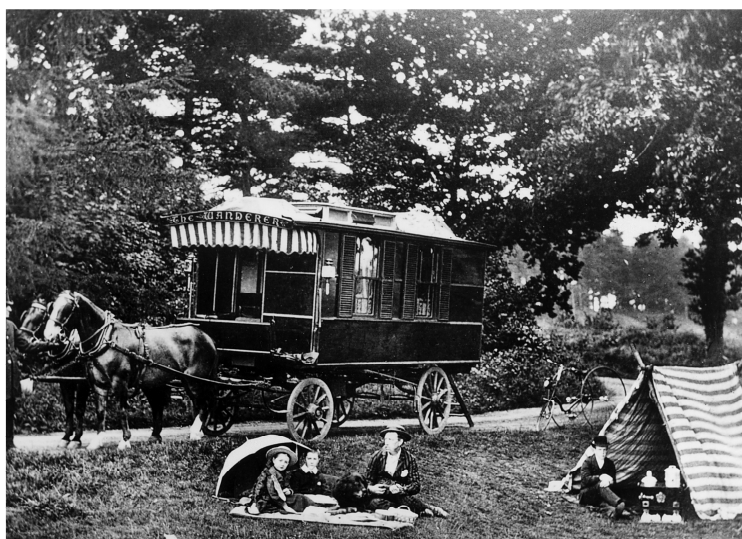
In 1874 he married Theresa Williams and settled in Twyford, Berkshire where they raised four sons and two daughters. To supplement his pension he turned to his writing and published works on diverse subjects as health (particularly for young people) and the natural world around him. He also professed expertise in the breeding and husbandry of a number of species of domestic animals – particularly dogs, on which he was a world authority. Gordon Stables was also keen cyclist, published poet and amateur musician (playing violin, guitar and harmonium), a member of the Humanitarian League, Kennel Editor of the *Livestock Journal* and wandering secretary of the Sea Bird Protection Society was also reflected in his writing.

His main works, however, were real life adventure stories for boys, of which he wrote more than 100, drawing on his experiences at sea. These publications encouraged cheerful courage and kindness to all creatures without resort to the class-consciousness that dominated the Victorian age. They often appeared in serial form before publication as novels. He wrote for a number of publications including *Chambers Journal* and *Cassell's Magazine*. He contributed both stories and his medical expertise to the *Boys Own Paper* from its first edition in 1879 until his death and to the *Girls Own Paper* for more than 30 years.

His popularity is confirmed by the fact that he came top in a poll of readers of the *Boys Own Paper* published in the issue of 25 March 1899 ahead of competition that included Jules Verne (4th).

One summer day, William was travelling in his pony and trap through Great Marlow Buckinghamshire when he came upon a Gypsy encampment. His horse shied and "made a determined attempt to enter a Draper's shop". Minor damage to the trap meant that he had an hour or two to kill while repairs were made. He recalled that, as a boy, he had envied Gypsy children who he saw

leaning over the windows and doors of their family vans. He requested, and was granted, permission to inspect the caravans in the encampment. Thus enthused and appreciating that he would not be able to realise his dream of an ocean-going yacht, he determined to have a 'land yacht' to roam the highways and byways. He soon roughed up sketches of his idea of what such a home on wheels should be. A close friend suggested he should go to the Bristol Wagon Company (renowned for building Pullman saloons for the railways) with a request that they build the caravan to his drawings; and so The Land Yacht Wanderer was born and William was able to become a Gentleman Gypsy.



**Figure 2:** The Wanderer Caravan with Gordon Stables seated on a blanket in the foreground.

The Wanderer measures some 18ft long, 6ft 7in wide and a maximum of 10ft 8in high. Built of double-skinned walls of panelled mahogany, it weighs about two tons. Entry is up wooden steps at the rear into the small pantry. To the right is a portable wash stand and to the left a Rippingille's oil cooking stove. Sliding doors give access to the saloon, furnished to the right with a fixed sofa bed with storage beneath and to the left by a folding table. At the far end a door gives access to the dickey where the driving seat doubles as a corn bin. Pulled by two heavy horses, The Wanderer usually had a retinue that included the doctor's valet together with his coachman, favourite dog and a cockatoo, and was completed by his "Navy cutlass and a good revolver". After preliminary short trial runs, the first major tour in 1885 was a 1300-mile journey to Scotland that was chronicled in his book *The Cruise of the Land Yacht Wanderer*. Thereafter The Wanderer was used each year for a summer 'cruise', principally along the south coast and through East Anglia, during which he would write features, reserving the winter months for writing his novels – which he did in an unheated wooden cabin at the end of his garden. He was fiercely proud of his Scottish heritage; of the Clan Gordon on his father's side and the Robertsons and Frasers on his mother's. He habitually wore highland dress and must have appeared larger than life to the small group of caravan pioneers who had by then taken up the pursuit.

Although Gordon Stables was aware it was to take place, he did not attend the meeting that led to the formation of The Caravan Club; but he readily accepted his election as Vice President. Inspection of the minutes of early meetings reveal that he never actually became a member of The Club and indifferent health meant that he was unable to attend any meetings. William's love of caravanning is encapsulated in one of a number of notes in his handwriting that are attached to the minute book of The Club. In an apology for his non-attendance at a spring meeting he wrote:

"Amateur gipsies should be thinking of the road now, preparing for it I mean. It is time for those who have no caravans to build and for those who have to see to varnish, gold leaf and paint. Anyhow I wish the best of good luck, good roads, good weather and nice pitches to all good caravannists."

William Gordon Stables died on 10 May 1910. The Wanderer remained in the Gordon Stables family until 1961 when it was gifted to The Caravan Club by the will of his daughter Ottoline, herself a one-time Council member and Vice President of The Club. The Wanderer is now housed in the Industrial Museum at Bristol.

In his book *Caravanning and Camping Out* published in 1931, J Harris Stone described Dr William Gordon Stables as "...a great apostle of life in the open air; ...he may fairly be considered the pioneer of modern caravanning."

**Extract taken from:**

ELLIS, C. 2006. *The History of The Caravan Club*. West Sussex: The Caravan Club.

**Further Reading:**

GRAHAM, S. 2006. *An Introduction to William Gordon Stables*. (Second Edition.) Berkshire: Twyford and Ruscombe Local History Society.

STABLES, W.G. 1886. *Cruise of the Land Yacht Wanderer or Thirteen Hundred Miles in My Caravan*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

WILSON, N. 1986. *Gypsies and Gentlemen*. London: Columbus Books Limited.