

EARLY RECORDS AND NAMES OF BRITISH & IRISH CENTIPEDES

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“SCOLOPENDRA”

The word scolopendra (Greek: *σκολόπενδρα*), which today we associate with certain large tropical or sub-tropical centipedes, was one known to the ancients. Aristotle (384-322BC) in his *Historia Animalium* (Thompson, 1910) referred to both land and sea *σκολόπενδραι* which were somewhat alike i.e. myriapods (notably centipedes) and polychaete worms - with a segmented worm-like body and many pointed legs on each side. Like centipedes with their poison claws, certain polychaetes are also “stinging” animals. Pliny (circa AD 78) referred to both *scolopendrae* and *centipedes* in his *Naturalis Historiæ* and commented on “the (marine) scolopendra which bears a strong resemblance to the land insect which we call a centipede” (Bostock & Riley, 1855). At some stage, the name Scolopendra also became associated with a fabulous sea fish as well as with centipedes and polychaetes. It has been suggested that *σκολόπενδρα* derives from *σκόλοψ* (“pointed”, “sharp”) and *έντερα* (“guts” and, by extension, “earthworm”) – literally “biting earthworms” (Guasparri, 2000).

The use of the word “scolopendra” or “scolopender” as relating to centipedes by British authors seems to date back to at least the early sixteenth century (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). Thomas Muffet (1634) included both *Scolopendra* and *Julus* in his *Insectorum sive Minemorum Animalium Theatrum* and refers to *Scolopendrae terrestres* but it is difficult to identify any particular species here. Indeed, for many years the word/genus *Scolopendra* continued to include both marine and terrestrial species; Thomas Molyneux (1753) describes a “*not yet Described Scolopendra marina*” which on examination of the drawing and description is clearly seen to refer to the polychaete *Aphrodite*.

The English naturalist John Ray in a posthumous publication (Ray, 1710) describes six types of animal under the heading “De Scolopendra”. These include what seem to be four marine worms together with two recognizably terrestrial centipedes:

Scolopendra valdè exiles longae is described as “In terra & fimo convolute jacent, coloris ex rufo vel flavor albicantis; capite pallidè castaneo, ex quo Antennae duae. Secunciam longa est; cauda bifurcate. Penum numerus praeter forcipes caudae 96, nempe 48 paria”. With its 48 pairs of legs behind the forcipules which, with the “cauda bifurcata” (presumably the last pair of legs) gives 49 trunk segments this obviously describes some species of geophilomorph (or possibly, especially in view of the range of colours given, a combination of two or more) although clearly not the Linnean *Geophilus electricus*, having only 49 leg pairs. Excluding littoral types because of the habitat given, of the commoner British reddish brown geophilomorphs that could have this number we have *Strigamia crassipes* and *Geophilus easoni* whilst of the yellowish/whitish ones *Geophilus alpinus* (*Geophilus insculptus*) and *Geophilus flavus*.

Ad Scolopendra accedens trigina pedibus, instructa is “Corpore est depresso, unciam 1¼ longo. Antennae semunciales sere globulosae. Corpus latiusculum, rufescens, novem annulis praeter caput constans. Caput rorundiusculum, depressum; forcipes validate. Penum 15 paria, quorum posteriora gradatim longiora, ultimam semunciam longum, ultra corpus extrenditur”. Its size of 1¼ inches (32 mm) and its description sounds much like *Lithobius forficatus* (or a similar species) and its habitat “Sub lignis & corticibus arborum latitat, estque satis frequens. Araneum devorantem vidit” also fits.

LINNAEUS'S SPECIES

Linnaeus (Carl von Linné) (1758) in his *Systema Naturae* (10th edition) listed nine species in his genus *Scolopendra* (Table 1). These included three centipedes currently on the British list; *Scolopendra forficata*, *Scolopendra coleoptrata* and *Scolopendra electrica*. All have been subsequently assigned to new genera as *Lithobius forficatus*, *Scutigera coleoptrata* and *Geophilus electricus*. The genus *Scolopendra* is now reserved for larger tropical and sub-tropical species such as *S. morsitans*. Linnaeus had also included one millipede, *Scolopendra lagura* (*Polyxenus lagurus*) in this list (other millipedes were in the genus *Julus*). *S. forficata* is described as from “Habitat in Europa, in America septentrionali” and *S. electrica* as “Habitat in Europa terra”.

Interestingly, as pointed out by Crabill (1955), *Scolopendra forficata* was the third species in the Linnean list and *Scolopendra morsitans*, the fifth, there being, of course, no type species being designated by him for the genus. In 1810 Latreille had selected *S. forficata* as the type species for the genus *Scolopendra*. In this situation, had the rule of priority been strictly applied, *Lithobius forficatus* would now be called *Scolopendra forficata* and the generic name *Lithobius* as applied by Leach would be a synonym of *Scolopendra*. Another name would have now been needed for the genus now known as *Scolopendra* in which current practice places *S. morsitans*!

TABLE 1: The species of *Scolopendra* listed by Linnaeus (1758)

† Foddai & Minelli (2002) * Chilobase

‡ *S.marina* Slabber 1781 is a nomen dubium (WoRMS: World Register of Marine Species)

Species	Occurrence	Modern name
<i>lagura</i>	In Svecia	<i>Polyxenus lagurus</i>
<i>coleoptrata</i>	In Hispania	<i>Scutigera coleoptrata</i>
<i>forficata</i>	In Europa, in America septentrionali	<i>Lithobius forficatus</i>
<i>gigantea</i>	In America	<i>Scolopendra gigantea</i>
<i>morsitans</i>	In Indiis	<i>Scolopendra morsitans</i>
<i>electrica</i>	In Europa terrae	<i>Geophilus electricus</i>
<i>phosphorea</i>	In Asia	<i>Orphnaeus brevilabiatus</i> †
<i>occidentalis</i>	In America	Identity uncertain *
<i>marina</i>	In Oceano Atlantico	Presume polychaete worm ‡

EARLY BRITISH RECORDS

It is difficult to find evidence of recording of centipedes in Britain or Ireland during the eighteenth century as notes about them are scattered in entomological and general natural history works but no doubt these animals were being seen by both naturalists and gardeners. In 1769, John Berkenhout M.D. published his *Outlines of the Natural History of Great Britain and Ireland* (Berkenhout, 1769) listing three species, *Scolopendra lagura*, *Scolopendra forficata* (Feet 30. Segments 9. Tawny, smooth. Antennae of 42 joints. Length 1 inch. Runs swift. Under stones) and *Scolopendra electrica* (Feet 140, Very flat. Tawny, with a black longitudinal line on the back. Segments 70. Joints of the Antennae 17. Shines in the dark). There is little likelihood of his *S. forficata* being anything much other than *Lithobius forficatus*, our common large lithobiid. The *S. electrica* certainly

has the right number of body segments for *Geophilus electricus* but whether the number given is from an actual specimen or a copy of a description from elsewhere is not clear and, as noted in relation to this species, one needs to be careful about older records of it since, although it does occur in gardens and other likely to be sampled synanthropic habitats, it is rarely the commonest of our geophilomorphs. His two species of *Julus* might need a similar caveat attached to them. *J. terrestris* does not occur in Britain so presumably this relates to something like *Tachypodoiulus niger* and to describe *J. sabulosus* as ash coloured (without any mention of its characteristic orange-red stripes) is odd.

In 1778 in his posthumous *Memoires pour server à l'histoire des insectes*, Charles De Geer published a description of a new species, *Scolopendra flava* (*Geophilus flavus* – known for a long time as *Necrophleophagus longicornis*) (Fig.1). No location was given but presumably it was from Sweden or elsewhere in Scandinavia.

A further geophilomorph, presumably from Britain in this case, was described by George Shaw a co-founder of the Linnean Society in a paper read to the Society in 1789 and published in 1794 (Shaw, 1794). He distinguished *Scolopendra subterranea* (*Haplophilus subterraneus*) from what he referred to as *Scolopendra electrica*. No locality was given although it was described as “a considerable depth below the surface of the ground, and principally in garden ground”.

Shaw described “*Scolopendra electrica*” as of a full brown or approaching to a chestnut colour and being found in houses and amongst wood, linen and other substances – which sounds much more like the species we know as *Geophilus carpophagus* ss (at the time not yet described) rather than the pale yellow of the *G. electricus* we recognize today. His drawing of “*electrica*” in a subsequent publication (Shaw, 1806) (Fig.2) does have about 70 leg pairs (too high for *G. carpophagus*) and the text refers to “about 70” which is well within the range for *G. electricus*. Similarly to his earlier comments he writes that it “not unfrequently makes its appearance in houses” and of its colour being “a dusky brown with legs yellowish” contrasted with his *S. subterranea*, being “of a much paler colour, viz a light yellow brown”.

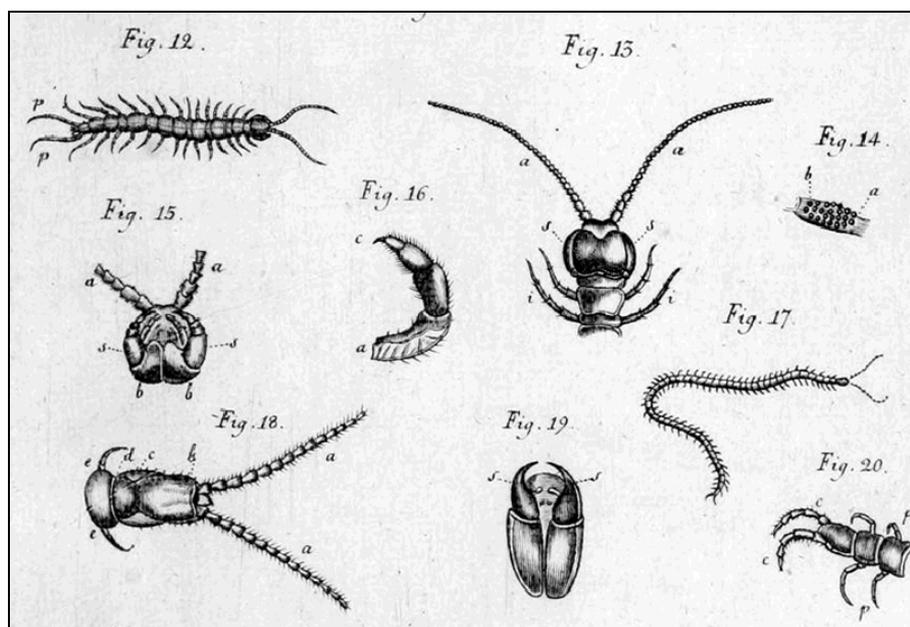


FIGURE 1. De Geer *Memoires pour server a l'Histoire des Insectes* (1778) - Plate 35 (detail)

Figs 12 – 16 Scolopendre brune rouffatre, à quinze paires des pattes (*S. forcicata*)

Figs 17 – 20 Scolopendre jaune, à tete & a antennes rouffes, a cinquante-quatre paires des pattes (*S. flava*)

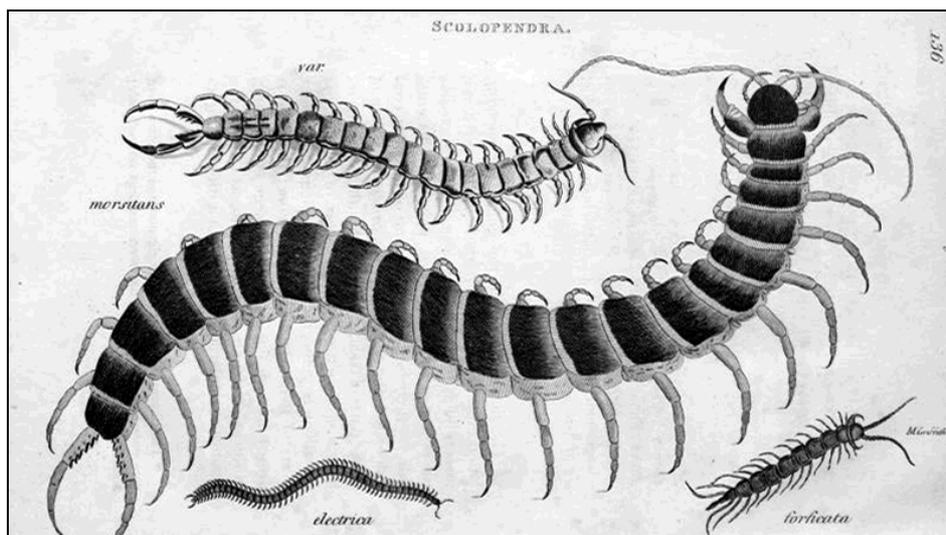


FIGURE 2: *Scolopendra* from Shaw's *General Zoology* (1806)
Showing *S. morsitans*, *S. electrica* and *S. forficata*

It seems possible that some early records of *Scolopendra electrica* might actually refer to a variety of species - possibly any geophilomorph might sometimes be identified in this way so caution is needed with interpreting these older records.

Just prior to the series of publications on myriapods by W.E. Leach which commenced in 1814 (q.v.), Edward Donovan (1810) had described, with an illustration, *Scolopendra hortensis* (*Cryptops hortensis*) found, in some abundance, in gardens (hence its name) at Exeter where it had been discovered by Mr. Leach (Fig.3). This seems to be the first occasion where we have both a location and a habitat for a British centipede. In an earlier volume of his work (Donovan, 1797) he had included *Scolopendra forficata* saying that it was not uncommon in many parts of Europe and in England "it is found under loose stones in damp places, and runs swiftly".

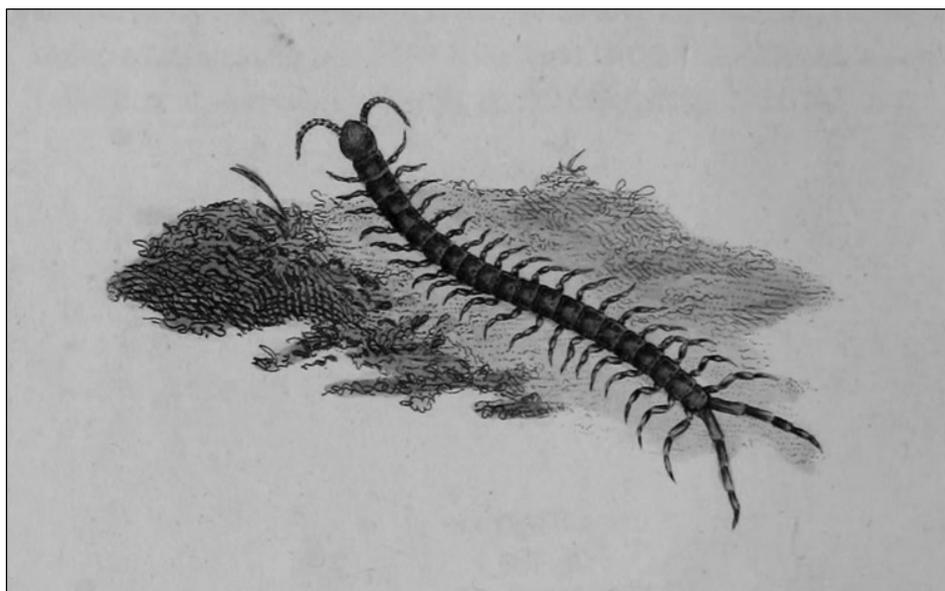


FIGURE 3: *Scolopendra hortensis* from Donovan's *British Insects* (1810) (detail)

In The *Encyclopaedia Londinensis*, published between about 1801 and 1828, volume 22 (Wilkes, 1827) there is an article on *Scolopendra* which adds a further 4 species of *Scolopendra* to the 1757 Linnean list although none of these are the three noted above as recognized by De Geer, Shaw or Donovan or include any new British species. The list of types is, in fact, identical with that given by Fabre (Fabricius, 1781) although in a slightly different order and included two species reported by Linnaeus subsequent to 1757, one of which (*S. ferruginea*) had been noted also by De Geer. What the *Encyclopaedia* article does note, however, is that of the 13 species in the list, three are “common to this country” although he only refers to *S. forficata* and *S. electrica* specifically with *S. coleoprata* as being found “in many parts of Europe”. Presumably the third species was *S. lagura*. Despite the date of publication, there is no reference to the work of Leach and the species that he had reported published a dozen years earlier.

W.E.LEACH

William Elford Leach, an early nineteenth century zoologist who worked with a great variety of animal groups published several papers on myriapods during the second decade of the nineteenth century. Born in Plymouth in 1790, attending school in Exeter later qualifying in medicine, Leach became assistant librarian in the Zoology Department of the British Museum in 1813 and subsequently assistant keeper in the Natural History Department where he had set himself to sort out the collections. He was elected FRS in 1815.

In 1814, Leach contributed to *Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopedia* (Leach, 1814) and, under “Crustaceology”, gave an account of the Order Myriapoda in which, at the time (as Families Asellides and Oniscides), he had included what we now think of as Isopoda. Family Julides was the millipedes and Scolopendrides the centipedes. In the latter, introducing new genera, we recognize *Scutigera Coleoprata* (inside houses in southern Europe), several species of *Scolopendra*, *Cryptops hortensis* (gardens in and near Exeter), *Lithobius Forficatus* (not very uncommon in parts of England and Ireland, not yet occurred in Scotland or Wales), *L. Variegatus* (Devonshire), *L. Laevilabrum* (common in Scotland – now recognized as synonymous with *L. forficatus*) and *Geophilus Electricus* (Europe). As an “Observation” he adds “Besides the species of this family which have been here described, are many more inhabiting this country but their natural history is so imperfectly understood....”

A paper read to the Linnean Society in 1814 and published in their *Transactions* (Leach, 1815) is more detailed and woodlice are no longer included in the Myriapoda. The British species include *Lithobius forficatus* (Angliâ, Hiberniâ rarior), *Lithobius variegatus* (Danmoniâ australi sub lapidibus passim), *Cryptops hortensis* (in hortis in co.Devon, haud infrequens), *Geophilus carpophagus* (in fructibus Danmoniae passim –new species), *Geophilus subterraneus* (no location given), *Geophilus acuminatus* (Roborough Down nr Plymouth, Battersea Fields –new species), *Geophilus longicornis* (prope Edinburgum et Londinium sub lapidibus). Following his description of *G.acuminatus*, he comments that “To this division of the genus *Geophilus*, *Scolopendra electrica* of authors with two other indigenous and some exotic species belong; but as I have not had opportunities of examining the living animals, I shall at present forbear from giving any account of them”

Leach commenced his *Zoological Miscellany* in 1815 and in the third volume he included Class Myriapoda (Leach, 1817) with *Lithobius forficatus*, *L.variegatus* (Habitat in Anglia occidentali; praesertim in Danmonia), *L.vulgaris* (Magna Britannia – a synonym of *L.forficatus*), *Cryptops hortensis*, *Geophilus carpophagus*, *Geophilus subterraneus*, *Geophilus acuminatus* and *Geophilus longicornis*. To these he added *Geophilus maritimus* (*Strigamia maritima* – in Britannia inter scopulos ad littoral maris vulgatissime) and *Cryptops Savignii* (Habitat in Musei Britannici horto – now considered to be a synonym of the subsequently described *Cryptops anomalans*).

SAMOUELLE, STEWART & TEMPLETON

G.Samouelle who was in contact with, and helped by, Leach had dedicated his *Entomologist's Useful Companion* (1819) to him listing a number of species and referring the reader to the *Transactions of the Linnean Society* account. He added the information that *C. hortensis* had also been found near Plymouth, *G. subterraneus* was very common in England and that *G. acuminatus* was rare. He also referred to the fact that *G. carpophagus* “inhabits Devonshire, in garden fruit: it is not uncommon”. Interestingly, Leach, repeated in English by Samouelle, describes the latter species as “head, antennae and arms fulvescent: body violet, anteriorly yellowish: legs pale yellowish” but with a Var.β. “Body obscurely subviolet-testaceous, anteriorly subtetaceous”. One is tempted to think that these might have been the two species, *G. carpophagus* ss and *G. easoni* now recognized but there is insufficient evidence to support such an idea. The 1824 reprint of the *Useful Companion* (Samouelle, 1824) contains identical information regarding centipedes.

The ongoing linking of *G. carpophagus* with fruit (implicit in its specific name derived from the Greek, καρπος - fruit and φαγη - food; Slawson, 1998) is an interesting one although there seems to be no clear evidence that it does feed it this way. Perrier (1954), describing what is presumably *G. carpophagus* ss (“Corps violacé, fauve en avant...60 mm”) refers to it as “Souvent dans les fruits tombés”. Possibly this association with fruit is a result of it being found in fruit seeking prey or maybe even its tree-climbing habits, this then being copied by later authors.

Reports on species found in Scotland appear to commence with that of C.Stewart (1811) who listed *Scolopendra forficata* from the neighbourhood of Edinburgh and George Johnston (1835) on species of Insecta Myriapoda found in Berwickshire with *Lithobius vulgaris* (*L.forficatus*), *Geophilus subterraneus*, *Geophilus acuminatus* and *Geophilus longicornis*.

In Ireland, Robert Templeton (1836) reported *Lithobius vulgaris* (*L.forficatus*), *L.variegatus*, *L.laevilabrum* (*L.forficatus*), *Cryptops hortensis*, *Geophilus subterraneus* (neighbourhood of Cranmore), *G. maritimus* (Bangor), *G. longicornis* and *G. electricus*.

In 1842 Francis Walker had published his *Notes on Myriapoda* in *The Entomologist* including notes regarding five of our centipedes, *Lithobius laevilabrum* (*L.forficatus*), *Lithobius variegatus*, *Geophilus subterraneus*, *Geophilus longicornis* and *Cryptops hortensis*, with a mention of *Geophilus carpophagus* but with no distributional data for any of them.

GEORGE NEWPORT

In the year previous to Walker's *Notes* first evidence of the important myriapod studies of George Newport (1803-1854) appeared with a paper on the organs of reproduction and the development of the Myriapoda (Newport, 1841). The following year he presented a paper to the Zoological Society of London “On some new genera of the class Myriapoda” (Newport, 1842) where he introduced the generic names *Mecistocephalus*, *Necrophloeophagus* and *Gonibregmatulus*. *N. longicornis* was described as “Europe, very common”.

Two years later he produced two papers (Newport, 1844a, 1844b) (on specimens of centipedes and millipedes respectively) in the cabinets in the British Museum including the new species *Lithobius pilicornis*, *Cryptops anomalans* and *Lamyctes emarginatus* (from New Zealand). There were no habitat data for either *L.pilicornis* or *C. anomalans* although he did report *Lithobius variegatus* from Wimbledon Common. That same year (Newport, 1844c) there is a report of the presentation of his memoir “Monograph on the Myriapoda Chilopoda” to the Linnean Society which subsequently appeared in their *Transactions* (Newport, 1844/45). The first report is primarily about classification

and anatomy but the latter comprises a more detailed classification and descriptions of a large number of species and a little more about occurrence. British species categorized are: *L. pilicornis* described as “in Angliâ” and a new species, *Lithobius melanops*, described as the smallest of the British species from under moist stones in a garden “prope Sandwich in Com.Cantiano” in September 1842. *Cryptops Savignyii* (“In Angliâ”) and *C. anomalans* (no data) are both included. *Arthronomalus longicornis* (*Geophilus flavus*) is “Copiosissimè in Angliæ comitatibus Kent, Surrey, Middlesex, albique”, *A. similis* (*Geophilus carpophagus*) is “in Angliæ comitatu Kent, prope Sandwich), *A. flavus* (*G.electricus*) “in Angliâ, prope Gloucester”, *Geophilus acuminatus* (*Strigamia acuminata*) is “In Angliâ”, *G. Humuli* (*Stigmatogaster subterranea*) “in cultis Humuli lupuli in Angliæ comitatu Kent” and *G. subterraneus* “In Angliâ”.

In a posthumous *Catalogue of the myriapods in the collection of the British Museum* (Newport, 1856) included are *Geophilus maritimus* “in Angliâ (ad oras maritimas)”, *G. breviceps* (*Strigamia crassipes*) “in Angliâ”, *G. vesuvianus* (*Henia vesuviana*) “prope Napolin” and *Geophilus nemorensis* (*Schendyla nemorensis*) Koch “in Germania”. It is notable that with the exception of the last, described by C.L.Koch in 1837 and the newly described *Lithobius melanops*, all the species reported in Britain & Ireland are relatively large ones, presumably because, as with present day recorders first looking for myriapods, smaller animals are often likely to be seen as probably immatures and not examined separately. There are also a number of cases of what we now see as a single species being described as several, a notable case being that of *Lithobius forficatus*.

LATER STUDIES

Apart from scattered reports of species from certain localities, not necessarily with great detail, such as those of Cocks (1851) for Falmouth, Parfitt (1866a, 1866b, 1874) for Devon and Dale (1878) for Glanville’s Wooton, (Dorset), I have been unable to locate few British or Irish records before the last two decades of the nineteenth century when, commencing with T.D.Gibson-Carmichael’s (1882) *Preliminary list of Scottish myriapoda*, there has been a sequence of reports and descriptions listing species for Scotland, England & Wales and Ireland (from Pocock, 1893) and continuing in various forms until the present time.

Parfitt (1866b) is of interest as in that the *Arthronomalus crassicornis*, found near Exeter, is considered by Bonato & Minelli (2014) as synonymous with the species we now recognize as *Geophilus easoni*. His 1874 report includes a description of *Arthronomalus littoralis* discovered by Mr. W.S.M.D’Urban in crevices of the red sandstone rocks at the foot of the cliffs and within reach of the waves at high water at Hole Head between Dawlish and Teignmouth in 1873. It has not been possible to locate the specimens of this latter which Parfitt indicated that he deposited in the Royal Albert Museum at Exeter however Bonato & Minelli (*loc.cit.*) now show it to be synonymous with *Hydroschendyla submarina* Grube. The habitat is typical and this would seem to be the earliest British published record of the species, predating the Thompson (1889) record from Jersey.

THE CHANNEL ISLANDS

For the Channel Islands, Ansted & Latham (1862) listed four centipedes *Scutigera coleoptrata*, *Geophilus electricus*, *Geophilus longicornis* (*G.flavus*) and *Lithobius forficatus* amongst the Myriapoda recorded from Jersey. The possibility that, apart from the *Scutigera*, there could be confusion with other species should not be ruled out however. Recent studies do show *Lithobius forficatus* to be widespread on the island but the superficially similar *Lithobius pilicornis* has also been recorded there. There have been no subsequent records of *G.electricus* as far as I can ascertain and the roughly similar in appearance *Stigmatogaster subterranea* seems to be the widespread and

common large yellow geophilomorph on Jersey at the present time. *Geophilus flavus* has certainly been recorded from Jersey but there are somewhat similar species such as *Geophilus osquidatum* and *Geophilus fucorum seurati* (*Geophilus gracilis*) also known from the Channel Islands. The third edition of their book (Ansted & Latham, 1893), from which “lengthy lists of species” have been omitted, refers to “*Lithobius*, four species of *Geophilus* (two of which are marine, living low down in the littoral), a small species of *Scolopendra* (presumably *Scolopendrella*, a symphylan), two of *Julus*, and the remarkable long-legged *Scutigera coleoptrata*”. The littoral “*Geophilus*” species would presumably include *Strigamia maritima*. but *Hydroschendyla submarina* was not actually recorded from the Islands until 1889 having been collected by J. Sinel on Jersey when some specimens were collected close to the low water (Thompson, 1889). Our other exclusively littoral species (*Geophilus fucorum seurati* & *Schendyla peyerimhoffi*) were not recorded in Britain until the twentieth century.

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