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Two mid-nineteenth-century specimens of Barolo Shearwater, allegedly collected in Portsmouth

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Abstract

Two specimens of Barolo Shearwater *Puffinus baroli* were acquired by the

Natural History Museum in 2021 from the Charterhouse School in Godalming, Surrey. The pair of birds were alleged to have been collected in Portsmouth Harbour, Hampshire, in November 1869. While the identification of the birds was secure, doubts around the origin of the specimens prevented the record from being accepted.

A recent review of post-1950 records of 'Little Shearwaters' in Britain found that 64 were acceptable as Barolo Shearwater *Puffinus baroli* and that there was no evidence that any other species in the Little Shearwater complex (i.e. Boyd's Shearwater *P. boydi* or Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri*) had occurred in Britain (Stoddart 2023). Additionally, there are three accepted pre-1950 records of Barolo Shearwater, including the first British record, a dead male collected near Earsham, Norfolk, in April 1858, which is now a specimen in the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery (NWHCM: 1944.38) (Stevenson 1858, 1882). The second accepted record is an adult male found exhausted but alive in Welling, Kent, on 20th August 1912; the bird was subsequently collected and conserved as a specimen (Lydekker 1913). The third accepted record in Britain concerns a bird picked up dead on Blakeney Point, Norfolk, on 11th May 1929.

In 2021, the Natural History Museum (NHM) acquired portions of the bird collection from Charterhouse School in Godalming, Surrey, including two mounted small shearwaters. Both birds, a male and a female, were purchased by Mr David Ducket, landlord of 'the Plough Inn' (presumably the Plough on Tower Street, Old Portsmouth, which is referenced in Sadler (1784) (King 2011)), from 'a sailor' who was alleged to have found the birds in Portsmouth Harbour, Hampshire, in November 1869 (Charterhouse Museum 1937–63). At some point, the specimens passed from Ducket to William Stafford ([1808/09–1889](#)), a taxidermist from Godalming, Surrey, who worked from 1834 until his death at 80 years old on 21st September 1889 (Smith 2022). Stafford was one of the foremost naturalists in Surrey (Anonymous 1889; Billups 1889) and his collection, then at the Charterhouse School, was heavily drawn upon for John Bucknill's *Birds of Surrey* (Bucknill 1900; Anonymous 1901).

The Charterhouse Museum was founded in 1874 and secured its own building in 1891–92 (Smith 2022), which housed, amongst other things,

Stafford's collection. The collection comprised mainly British birds, purchased from Stafford's estate in 1890 for £400 (Anonymous 1892; Charterhouse Archives n.d.).

The two Barolo Shearwaters were numbered 339 and 358 in Stafford's catalogue, and subsequently, in the Charterhouse 'black catalogue' (Charterhouse Museum n.d.), they were both given number [206.1956](#). The male and female were subsequently registered as CHMUS 2015.0724 and CHMUS 2015.0725, respectively, in 2015 and are now specimens NHMUK 2021.7.2 and NHMUK 2021.7.3 (plates 343 & 344).



J. Jackson, © Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

343. Male Barolo Shearwater *Puffinus baroli* (NHMUK 2021.7.2), one of two specimens now at the Natural History Museum, Tring, alleged to have been collected together in Portsmouth Harbour, Hampshire, in November 1869.

344. Female Barolo Shearwater (NHMUK 2021.7.3), one of two specimens now at the Natural History Museum, Tring, alleged to have been collected together in Portsmouth Harbour, Hampshire, in November 1869.

The specimens were originally displayed in the Charterhouse Museum as 'Little Dusky Shearwater *Puffinus obscurus*' (numbers 6 & 7 in plate 345). They were taken off display during the Charterhouse Museum's refurbishment in the late 2010s before being donated to the NHM in 2021.

345. The seabird display in the Charterhouse Museum. The Barolo Shearwaters are numbers 6 & 7 in the top right of the left-hand panel, labelled as 'Little Dusky Shearwater' (from Bird Museum photographs Ch.Arc.93.21.01).

Using the criteria published by Flood & van der Vliet (2019), the birds scored a 3 in terms of face markings (unbroken narrowish white supercilium, posterior lore marked and joining cap) and had minimal lateral extension of the dark hindneck onto the flanks and white undertail-coverts. The tone of the upperwings could not be determined owing to the specimens fading from having been on display and their mounted preparation.

As the birds would represent the second-oldest British record of Barolo Shearwater in Britain but occurred before 1905, the record fell between the remits of the BOURC, which assesses first records only, and BBRC, which assesses post-1950 records. Therefore, the two birds were assessed by the Hampshire Ornithological Society (HOS) Records Committee. Ultimately, although the identification as Barolo Shearwater was considered sound, the record was found to be not proven due to concerns around the provenance of the record; namely, the unlikely nature of an apparent pair being caught at the same time in the unlikely month of November. Additionally, the finding

location – a busy port with military and civil sailing routes to and from Madeira – cast further doubt on the record. The HOS Records Committee felt that the birds were most likely collected away from British waters and voted not to accept the record (Martin Pitt pers. comm.).

The number of Barolo Shearwaters recorded in Britain therefore remains at 67 (three pre-1950; 64 post-1950).

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