

Two Britishers who hold a special place in shaping the Society in its early stages are H.M. Phipson and Frank Wall. The reason why the two are remembered here together is their contribution to the reptile collection of the museum, particularly snakes.

Phipson, a British wine merchant and naturalist who offered his premises to the Society and helped to build up the Natural History Section in the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, was greatly intrigued by snakes. Frank Wall, a Medical Officer, pioneered research on snakes in India and published much of his work in the Society's Journal – JBNHS.



## H.M. Phipson The Society's Benefactor

Herbert Musgrave Phipson was born in London in 1850, and moved to Bombay in 1878. His association with BNHS began in 1884, a year after the Society was established, and in 1886, he took up the mantle of Honorary Secretary from EHA. Phipson's contribution to the growth and development of the

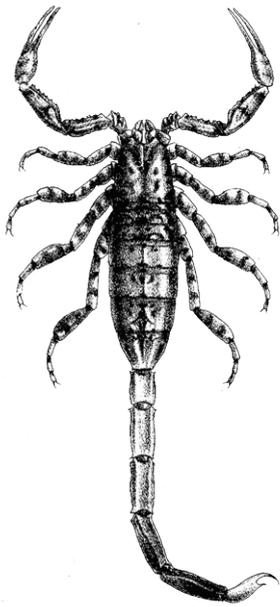
The Prince of Wales Museum of Western India in 1921, now known as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya; it retains many specimens from the BNHS collection



Society was immense. To begin with, he offered the Society a room in his office at 18, Forbes Street in the Fort area. For the members who met at the Victoria and Albert Museum in Byculla until then, the offer proved beneficial as the new site was more centrally located to hold their meetings and keep their collections. The Society bloomed in its new premises. So rapid was its growth that by 1886 it required a bigger space to house its collections. Yet again, Phipson came to the rescue, offering a larger office space at 6, Apollo Street (now Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road). This became the core location of the Society for the next 50 years. Phipson, however, did not stop with offering a new location. His investment in the collections was so tremendous that the new site soon came to be referred to as 'Phipson's Museum'.

As the Honorary Secretary of the Society, Phipson also became the editor of *JBNHS* in 1866 and manager of the Society's business outreach. He served as the editor for 20 years, and later as a joint editor with his successor W.S. Millard. Most of his time was spent in the service of the Society, where he focused on developing its reputation in natural sciences by getting high quality articles published in *JBNHS*. During his editorial tenure, *JBNHS* gained fame as one of the best known natural history journals in the Asian region, also influencing public science policy in the Bombay Presidency. His uninterrupted dedication to the *Journal*, however, left him with little time to pen down the immense knowledge he had gained in natural history.

Though Phipson was interested in the study of all animals, he was most

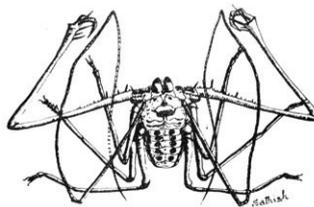


*Isometrus phipsoni* a scorpion named after H.M. Phipson

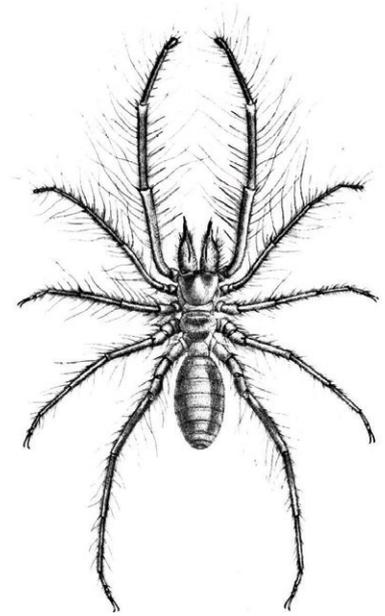
intrigued by snakes. This fascination for reptiles prompted him to publish a paper on the 'Poisonous Snakes of the Bombay Presidency' [Vol. 2(4)], adding to his few but memorable contributions in the *JBNHS*. In the initial days of BNHS, various animals, birds, and reptiles were kept live; among these was a cobra that Phipson used for his research. One of the papers he wrote in the *JBNHS* pertained to 'Observations on the feeding of the Indian Rock Snake (*Python molurus*) kept in the Society's Rooms, from May 27, 1886 to May 20, 1887' [Vol. 2(3)]. Recording his observations, he wrote, "During the twelve months ... the snake ate 25 rats, 3 hens, 3 crows, and 1 kestrel ... During the cold weather ... a period of 113 days, the snake refused food and remained in a very sluggish, sleepy condition ... the temperature of the reptile fell from 82° (normal) to 73°, a fall of 9 degrees." Since most of the early members of BNHS were hunters of big game and gradually collected fine horns and heads, the Society now had an enviable

collection of birds, bird eggs, reptiles, insects, mammals, and snakes. Phipson decided that there was a need to establish a zoological garden in Bombay with a very fine natural history museum, and he proposed the idea to the Government. The Govt. appointed Phipson to a committee, set up in 1904, to consider the question of a public museum and library for Bombay. Phipson recommended that these should be separate buildings: one for Art and Archaeology, the second for a public library, and the third for a Natural Science Museum. Phipson's efforts saw fruit in 1922 with the inauguration of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India with a Natural Sciences Section as a part of it. The collections from 'Phipson's Museum' were transferred to the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India in 1921 — the Natural History Section was built by the Society largely with financial assistance from its benefactors.

Phipson's zeal for natural history and his love for the Society were contagious. He led people from all walks of life through the Society's collections with the singular purpose of kindling an interest in natural history. He encouraged zoologists and other scientists to make use of the collections, which led to several discoveries of new species. Many new species came to be named after Phipson, such as *Hydrophis phipsoni* (= *Distira cyrocincta*), a sea snake described by Murray in 1887; Phipson's Shieldtail *Uropeltis*



*Phrynichus phipsoni* a whip scorpion named after H.M. Phipson



*Rhagodes phipsoni* a Galeod spider named after H.M. Phipson

*hippionii*, a burrowing snake found in the Western Ghats described by Mason in 1888; *Isometrus phipsoni*, a scorpion described by Oates in 1888; *Rhagodes phipsoni*, a Galeod spider described by Pocock in 1895; and *Phrynichus phipsoni*, a whip scorpion described by Pocock in 1894. Years after his departure, a beautiful squirrel discovered by the Society's Mammal Survey was named after him – *Petinomys phipsoni* – to commemorate his contribution to natural history.

Phipson and his wife Edith returned to England in 1906. After Edith's death, Phipson established a scholarship in her name at the London School of Medicine for Women. This scholarship was awarded annually to a medical student. Students from India or going to work in India were given preference in awarding this scholarship.

From providing office space to making the Society's mission his own, Phipson's singular contribution to the BNHS went a long way in ensuring it a firm place in the field of natural history. ■