

Leatherback turtles in the Orkney Islands

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Species: Some cold turtles, seen off the coast of the Orkney Islands, probably leatherbacks (*Demochelys coriacea*), also some chilled-out pet tortoises (sp. unclear).

Source: *Scotia Illustrata* (Scotland Illustrated), a complete geography of Scotland written in early enlightenment Scotland by Robert Sibbald.

Date: First published 1684 CE.

Highlights: Is Sibbald the first author to attest to the leatherback turtle off the coast of Britain?



Photograph of leatherback turtle with Marian Garvie and other, unknown, taken by [Steve Garvie](#), licensed under CC-BY-SA 2.0.

You too can grow up this big and strong on a diet of Natural History and jellyfish.

Most people don't think of Britain as being a place where we find many chelonians (turtles, terrapins or tortoises). If turtles could be found here, surely we wouldn't have to send David Attenborough to the Galapagos or Madagascar.

Surprisingly though, those people are wrong. Sea turtles do regularly visit the coastlines of Britain and the most commonly seen species is the leatherback turtle (Beebee & Griffiths

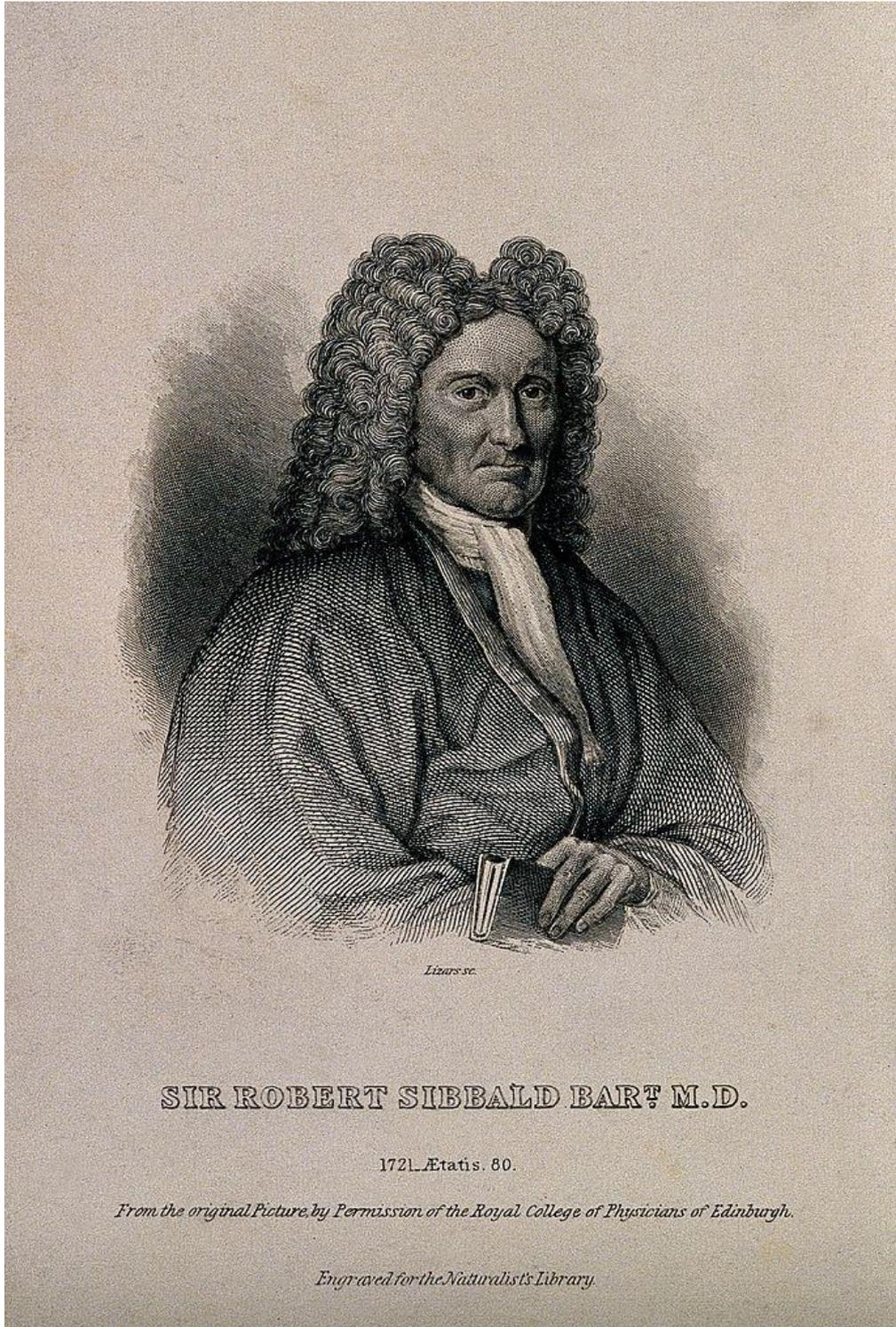
2000, p.177). The species of turtle in the picture at the top can be seen all around Britain and Ireland, but sightings are most common around the west coast and, strangely, the Orkney and Shetland Isles (NBN, 2015).

Marine turtles were also seen by the earliest naturalists.

Scotia Illustrata is a Latin text describing the geography of Scotland. It was published in 1684 by Robert Sibbald, Geographer Royal to Charles II.

So far, so boring right? Who cares about geography? Well in the case of Robert Sibbald, geography was not just about falling asleep on maps (Withers 2001). Sibbald was writing in the last years before the Union of Scotland and England, and his royal audience was a dynasty with a shaky grasp of the kingship.

Scotia Illustrata aims to convince you that although Scotland is a cohesive whole which is firmly under Jacobean rule, Scotland is also an objectively superior place to England. Its natural resources are richer, more varied and more exciting. Scotland should have pride in itself as a modern nation as great as any other in early modern Europe.



Portrait of Robert Sibbald. This image is in the public domain due to its age.
Geographers. More political than you might think.

But what has this got to do with turtles? Well they come under the 'natural resources' part of the book. Part of *Scotia Illustrata* is a long natural history of Scotland. This is exciting because it suggests that **biodiversity** was a prestigious and valuable attribute for an area centuries before scientists invented a word for the concept.

I'm hoping to get funding to do a translation of the whole part later in the year, but for now let's see what Sibbald says about two common turtley-looking beasts:

Among the Egg Bearing [species is] the shell-covered tortoise or turtle. It is either terrestrial, in which case, it is kept in our gardens; or salt-water aquatic, in which case, it can be captured living [wild] in the Orkney Islands. I have [this] from a respectable, reliable man spending time there.

(*Scotia Illustrata*, 2.III.2.6)

As far as I am aware, this is the first historical reference to a wild marine turtle from Britain (compare Bell 1849, p.16). It helps demonstrate that our modern finds of sea turtles are not unprecedented, and that they have been visiting Britain for a considerable length of time. It is however worth pointing out that the species may not have been common. By situating the sea turtle in the Orkney Islands, Sibbald is exotifying the species to some extent; there is nothing, for example, to suggest he was aware of leatherback turtles ever washing up at in Edinburgh where he lived. This can in part be explained by the species' preference for the western coast of Britain (NBN, 2015) but probably also suggests the species was never commonly found on the coasts of Britain.

This record is also one of the earliest British references to keeping tortoises in captivity (Thomas 2010). It indicates that reptile-keeping may have been more widespread in the early-modern period than previously believed, and can be interpreted in line with the Jacobean obsession with keeping pets for emotional gratification (Thomas 2010). The use of the Latin verb *alere* even has some connotations of long-term captivity and rearing, although this alone is not sufficient to argue for a captive breeding operation.



Image of a naturalists' meeting from the contemporary Douce Ballads 2 (c.1672-1696). It is used to illustrate a sexist moral ballad called 'The scolding wife' but almost certainly recycled from elsewhere.

Image is believed to be in the public domain due to its age. Go [histoggggsee](#) the amazing comic adaptation of this illustration on [Hark a Vagrant](#).

So there you have it. Wild leatherback turtles and pet garden turtles attested in seventeenth century Scotland.

Did you already know that leatherback turtles visit Britain's coasts? Leave a comment below!

Are you as good a naturalist as Robert Sibbald?

Yes, I already knew that leatherback turtles visit Britain No, I didn't know that leatherback turtles visit Britain

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You can also contact me on Twitter [@NaturalHistoryL](#), or follow me [on Facebook](#) to get the highlights without any of the boring bits.

N.B. I am hoping to publish more on Robert Sibbald later this year. I'd prefer it if you [contacted me](#) if you want to use my ideas in the meantime.

Should you wish to reference this post, you can use the following information:

Raye L (2016) Leatherback turtles in the Orkney Islands. *Natural History*. page: <http://wp.me/p4zZmQ-7p>, accessed: 04/01/2016.

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