

# John Nowell (1802–1867)

This is one in a series of articles by **Mark Lawley** about prominent British and Irish field bryologists of the past. Mark would be very pleased to learn of any information which supplements its content. *A Social and Biographical History of British and Irish Field-bryologists* is also available online at [www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk)

## Botanical career

Nowell began finding and identifying mosses around 1825–1830, and discovered *Cinclidium stygium* new to Britain near Malham Tarn in 1836, *Atrichum crispum* near Rochdale in 1848, and *Zygodon gracilis* (also new) in the same district in 1856. Like many mid-19th century bryologists, Nowell did not study liverworts.

Abraham Stansfield (1802–1880) and John Hanwood were two bryological companions in Nowell's youth. Stansfield and Nowell were the same age, born within a mile and a half of each other in a rather remote part of the Cliviger valley, and often botanized together. In later years, as Nowell's botanical interests developed, he came to know many other botanists who lived further afield, such as the Manchester physician and bryologist John Bland Wood (1813–1890). By the 1850s, Nowell's reputation as a bryologist had become international, and he corresponded with Professor Wilhelm Schimper of Strasbourg. When Schimper visited Britain in the early 1860s, he called on Nowell, and botanized with him. Nowell was also invited but declined an offer to be privately employed as a herbarium assistant to Kew Gardens in London.

Nowell was a particularly skilful and accomplished working-class bryologist, whose botanical activities were necessarily confined to his limited hours of leisure. Such men became notably numerous in the industrial north-west of England in the early 19th century, and often met at their local public house, bringing their plants to be

named by the most expert of their members who were present. Many of these artisan botanists could not read, having been denied all but the most rudimentary of educations, and in any case could rarely afford to buy books that might have helped them to identify their specimens. So these local botanical societies were important for pooling both personal and published botanical knowledge. Such evenings in the pub often became more bucolic than botanic after the business of the meeting had been concluded, but members were fined if they turned up drunk. However, non-conformists tried to reduce the influence of alcohol amongst the working class, and in west Yorkshire the Todmorden Botanical Society '*maintained a high moral tone*'.

Nowell botanized mainly around his home at Todmorden and in the Craven district of Yorkshire, but occasionally managed to explore further afield. He visited Malham (about 35 miles from Todmorden) at least nine times between 1836 and 1856, and had also been to Teesdale by 1852. His letters to William Wilson (preserved in the Natural History Museum in London) reveal that he spent two days in North Wales in both 1852 and 1853, Tadcaster in 1853, the limestone district of Pontefract in 1853 and 1857, the dunes at Southport in 1854 and 1856, Derbyshire in 1855, the Lake District in 1857 and Skipworth Common near Selby in 1858. Nowell never managed to visit Scotland, but in 1860 he spent a week in Ireland, visiting the Connemara hills and Galway with Abraham Stansfield and two

younger companions. At the end of the week, the party visited the botanic gardens at Glasnevin in Dublin.

In one of his later excursions to North Wales, while looking for bryophytes by a river, Nowell fell '*souse overhead into the water, whence emerging, drenched to the skin, he immediately stripped himself, spread out his clothes to the sun, and walked on, 'in puris naturabilis' ... in the garment of our first parent, [and] made the only real 'find' of that journey*'.

Nowell compiled *A supplement to Baines' flora of Yorkshire. Part 2. The mosses of the county* (Baker & Nowell, 1854), and part of Stansfield and Nowell's *Flora of Todmorden* appeared posthumously (edited by Abraham Stansfield's son, also Abraham) in *Lancashire Naturalist*, Volumes 1–2 (1907–1909), which lists 245 species of bryophyte. Abraham Stansfield junior edited a complete version in 1911.

With the shoemaker and botanist Richard Buxton (1786–1865), Nowell also prepared and distributed sets of named mosses, and contributed many records to William Wilson's *Bryologia Britannica* (1855), as well as Carrington and Miall's *Flora of the West Riding of Yorkshire* (1862).

In 1852, Nowell founded the Todmorden Botanical Society with Abraham Stansfield, Nowell becoming Vice-president, Abraham Stansfield President, and Stansfield's son Thomas as Secretary. Nowell remained Vice-president until his death 15 years later. The Society met monthly at the White Hart Hotel, with members exhibiting plants and reading journals and books in the Society's library. The Society also owned a microscope that members could borrow, and held rambles once a month on Saturday afternoons during the summer, as well as a grand excursion to districts further afield for 3–4 days in mid-summer (about 20 people went to Ingleton in

Craven in 1858, 12 to the Lake District in 1859, and the above-mentioned party of four travelled to Connemara, Clifden, etc. in western Ireland in 1860).

Nowell bequeathed his herbarium to Todmorden Botanical Society. It was formerly at Todmorden Public Library, and is now at Merseyside Museum in Liverpool. His letters are in the William Wilson correspondence at the Natural History Museum in London and Warrington Library. Ulster Museum, Belfast has *Musci Britannicae*, an exsiccata in six parts, acquired from the herbarium of Queens University, Belfast, and containing plants collected by Nowell, mainly in Yorkshire. Manchester Museum also has bryophytes that he collected from about 1840.

### Family background and biography

John Nowell was born at Springs, Stansfield, near Todmorden, Yorkshire in 1802. He was an illegitimate son of William Midgley (or Midgeley, c. 1772–1850), smallholder and publican of Kebcote, and Miriam Nowell (c. 1781–1852), daughter of John Nowell (born c. 1760), a butcher and cow-doctor. Miriam was a dressmaker in 1841 and 1851. As a child, John lived with his grandparents, and wound bobbins until he started weaving at the age of nine. He became interested in plants because his grandmother used to collect herbs for his grandfather to treat cattle. His boyhood and lifelong friend, Abraham Stansfield (1802–1880, a nurseryman in later life) was also much interested in botany, and together they used to save up to buy botanical books.

Nowell received only a rudimentary Sunday school education until the age of 20, when he joined the grammar classes of Reverend John Midgeley, a Baptist minister at Shore Chapel, and continued to work as a handloom weaver until 1829, when – like thousands of other



△ John Nowell: photograph from a lantern-slide at St Michael's Mytholmroyd.

handloom weavers who worked from home – the cheaper fabrics produced in mills obliged him to become twister-in of cotton warps at one of the Fielden brothers' cotton mills at Lumbutts. This necessitated a long walk to and from work each day, on top of long hours spent in the mill.

By the early 1820s, Nowell knew Edmund Holt (who was overseer at the Fielden brothers' cotton mills as well as an ardent botanist) and his son (also Edmund) who was very active in radical politics. Nowell became active in politics too, and was a member of council for the Todmorden Political Union which campaigned with John Fielden for parliamentary reform.

John married Hannah Clegg (c. 1802–1865, who was also born at Stansfield) at Heptonstall, Yorkshire in 1827. They had six children: John (born 1827) who was a cotton-weaver in 1841, and power-loom weaver (cotton) in 1851; Ann (born 1828/9), Ashton (1831/2–1911) who was a power-loom weaver (cotton) in 1851; Mary (1833/4–1856) who was a power-loom weaver (cotton) in 1851; Simon (1835/6–1911) who was a power-loom weaver (cotton) in 1851 and a gardener in 1861; and William (1838/9) who was a cotton weaver in 1861. William founded the Hebden Bridge General Society in 1905, and wrote several articles for the Department of Agriculture for the West Indies, including 'Cotton Culture in the West Indies', 'Diseases of Lime Trees

*in Forest Districts*', 'Internal Diseases of Cotton Bolls', 'The Fungi of Internal Boll Disease' and 'Rosellinia Root Diseases in the Lesser Antilles'.

In married life, John and Hannah lived at Dungeon Top, a cottage near Harleywood Slack, between Whirlaw and Springs. About 1850, they moved to a house in Queen Street, Todmorden, close to the weaving sheds. They moved again in 1858 to a house in White Hart Square, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Nowell continued to work at the mill until his death, but failing health contributed to increasing destitution that was only partly alleviated by the benevolence of the philanthropist Edward William Binney and some remuneration from Abraham Stansfield for light gardening work at his nursery.

Nowell died at White Hart Fold, Todmorden on 28 October 1867, and was buried at Cross Stone Church, Todmorden, in a plot that is now in private ownership. A year later, the Todmorden Botanical Society had raised £90 for a commemorative obelisk in St Mary's churchyard, Todmorden.

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Mark Lawley (e [m.lawley@virgin.net](mailto:m.lawley@virgin.net))