

DAWSON TURNER (1775-1858)

Mark Lawley

email: mrbyology@gmail.com

This is one in a series of articles about prominent British and Irish field-bryologists of the past. The author 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 on-line at <http://britishbryologicalsociety.org.uk/>

Botanical career

Turner introduced himself in 1802 to reading botanists with a two-volume *Synopsis of British Fuci*, followed in 1804 by an Irish Moss Flora (*Muscologia Hibernicae Spicilegium*, the original drawings for which are at the Natural History Museum in London), and the two-volume *Botanist's Guide through England and Wales* (with Lewis Weston Dillwyn) in 1805. He also contributed to Smith and Sowerby's *English Botany* (1790-1814, 36 volumes), and wrote nine articles for *Annals of Botany* and the *Transactions of the Linnaean Society* between 1800 and 1808.

Further publications followed, but the first few years of the 19th century were Turner's golden botanical period. Indeed, he had lost interest in botany altogether by about 1820, when he donated his herbarium to his son-in-law William Jackson Hooker.

Turner's herbarium is at Kew, together with his incomplete manuscript *Flora Norfolkensis*, two volumes of botanical memoranda, drawings of algae, and photocopies of his correspondence with William Borrer. Norwich Museum holds algae and journals that belonged to him. Trinity College, Cambridge has 82 volumes of his letters, and there are also letters of his at the British Library, Linnaean Society, and Liverpool and Norwich Public Libraries.

Family background and biography

Dawson Turner was born at 40 Middlegate Street, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk on October 18th 1775, eldest of three surviving children of James Turner (1743-1794), a banker and merchant, and Elizabeth (*née* Cotman, 1742-1819).

Elizabeth was a daughter of John Cotman, merchant and sometime mayor of Yarmouth, and related to the artist John Sell Cotman (1782-1842, son of Edward Cotman, silk mercer and dealer in foreign lace at Norwich, and Ann *née* Sell) who assisted Dawson with botanical illustrations, and taught Turner's daughters to draw and paint.

James Turner's younger brother Joseph (1745-1828) became master of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and dean of Norwich. James and Joseph's parents were the Reverend Francis Turner (1716-1790), minister of St. George's Chapel in Great Yarmouth, and rector of South Elmham, and Sarah (*née* Dawson, 1718-1795). Sarah's father was James Dawson (born 1685) of Great Yarmouth.

Dawson Turner was educated at North Walsham grammar school, and then at Barton Bendish in Norfolk as a pupil of Robert Forby, who interested him in botany. Turner went up to Cambridge in 1792, but had to return to Norwich when his father fell terminally ill in 1794.

Dawson joined Gurney and Turner's bank in Great Yarmouth in 1796, and in the same year married Mary Palgrave (1774-1850, second daughter of William Palgrave of Coltishall Hall and Yarmouth, and Elizabeth *née* Thirkettle). Mary's brother William's (1771-1858) son Thomas Palgrave (1804-1891, Dawson's Turner's nephew) became a bryologist.

Dawson and Mary had eleven children, of whom six daughters and two sons survived infancy. Their daughter Maria Sarah (1797-1872) married William Jackson Hooker in 1815. Hooker and Turner were not only related by marriage but also close botanical colleagues for many years.

Turner devoted his married days to affairs of business on the ground floor of his residence Bank House, and evenings to scholarly interests upstairs, where each member of the family occupied themselves with some productive activity – drawing and etching, lithographing and painting, grammar and spelling, reading, cataloguing and transcribing.

Of his daughters, Maria Sarah married Hooker, Elizabeth married Francis Palgrave (*née* Cohen) who became deputy keeper of public records, Harriet married John Gunn (antiquary and geologist), Hannah Sarah married a banker, and Eleanor Jane married William Jacobson who became bishop of Chester. His only son to survive to maturity, Dawson William (1815-1885), became a headmaster of the Royal Institution School in Liverpool. He was a historian, wrote several books, and spent his last years in London where he helped the poor. Like his father, he is buried in the cemetery at Brompton.

As the years passed, Turner's botanical interests gave way to increasing preoccupation with antiquarian pursuits, and his *Account of a Tour in Normandy* (two volumes, 1820) was a family effort with assistance from John Sell Cotman. Turner also wrote a commentary for and produced at his own expense Cotman's *Architectural Remains in Various Countries* (two volumes, 1822), and provided descriptive notes *Specimens of Architectural Remains in Various Countries* (two volumes, 1838).

The walls of Bank House had paintings by Dutch, Flemish and Italian artists as well as the Norwich school, and these were catalogued in Turner's *Outlines in Lithography* (1840). He also added 7,000 illustrations to Blomefield's *History of Norfolk*. Turner's library extended to 8,000 volumes, and his collection of manuscripts to 34,000

manuscripts and letters, from which he produced, for example, a *Guide ... towards the Verification of Manuscripts by Reference to engraved Facsimiles* (1848). Turner also borrowed the letters of the naturalist Richard Richardson in order to publish *Extracts from Literary Science. Correspondence of Richard Richardson* (1835).

After Mary Turner died in 1850, Dawson married Rosamund Matilda Duff (*née* Neave, 1810-1863). “The consequence was estrangement from his family, disagreements with banking partners, and loss of many friends” (*Dictionary of National Biography*). Turner left Yarmouth and went to live in Barnes, and then in 1853 at Old Brompton. He died of a stroke at his home, Lee Cottage, Old Brompton, London on June 20th 1858, and was buried in the cemetery at Brompton.