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

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 ‘down overboard into the water, whence emerging, drenched to the skin, he immediately stripped himself, spread out his clothes to the sun, and walked on, ‘in paris naturessil’… in the garment of our first parent, [and] made the only real ‘find’ of that journey’.


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*.

**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 Hebden Bridge, and Miriam Newell (c. 1781–1852), daughter of John Newell (born c. 1760), a butcher and cow-dodder. Miriam was a dressmaker working close to the weaving sheds. They moved again in 1850, 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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**Bibliography**


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