

**ITS MASTER'S HANDIWORK: MISS MARTHA MARIA ATWOOD'S  
MID 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY COLLECTION OF BRITISH MOSSES**

Originally issued in the Bulletin of the Bristol Naturalists Society no 468 for March 2008, pages 9-11 and reproduced with permission of the Bristol Naturalists Society and the author, Clive Lovatt.

## ITS MASTER'S HANDIWORK: MISS MARTHA MARIA ATWOOD'S MID 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY COLLECTION OF BRITISH MOSSES

In the August 2006 Bulletin, describing it as research in progress, Clive Lovatt wrote an account of Miss Martha Maria Atwood, a Victorian lady naturalist resident and active at Clifton in the 1850's, who was gifted with a critical eye for botanical detail. In this article he updates us on subsequent research and gives an illustrated account of her three albums of mosses preserved in the Leicestershire Museums. A further essay will look in more detail at her family history and her other natural history interests and collections.

### Introduction



Plate 1 Miss Atwood, 26 Sept. 1856, presumably looking at a microscope slide of mosses, from a photograph found by C. M. Lovatt in J. W. White's copy of his Flora of Bristol, (in private hands, present whereabouts unknown). Provenance: procured by Miss I. M. Roper from a nephew of Miss Atwood's, c.1910-1920.

In my earlier account in the Bristol Naturalists' Society Bulletin for August 2006, I speculated that Miss Atwood (c.1810-1885, not 1880 as elsewhere stated), the discoverer in 1852 of *Sorbus bristoliensis*, the Bristol Whitebeam, had a lifetime interest in natural history and, that clearly intelligent and mobile, she might have been a governess.

This account looks at her three volume collection of British Mosses, and will be used in a forthcoming article to paint a broader picture of her natural history interests in the context of her family circumstances and the history of Bristol botany. For the time being, it suffices to say that she was born in Bristol and that the family appear to have acquired or inherited wealth from the land, and that they lived at the same Clifton address since 1842. It is as though Miss Atwood sprang, fully formed, into botanical adulthood; and then moving to Bath in 1859 or earlier, found that she had more or less exhausted her subject, and her activity diminished.

Inside one of the books the following three lines occur (source unidentified); a typical piece of Victorian sentimentality and pre-Darwinian natural theology no doubt. But, as she intended, the lines epitomise the collection, and as they worthily reflect her own industry, they provide the title of

this essay. Plate 1 shows Miss Atwood in September 1856, quite possibly examining some of her mosses, so hear her whisper:

'Tis but a moss  
And yet it speaks  
Its Master's handiwork

### Description of the moss albums

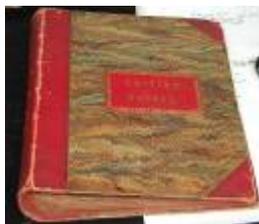


Plate 2 The cover of one of the volumes of Miss Atwood's British Mosses, C. M. Lovatt, Sept. 2006

The three large albums are safely stored in a firm cardboard box at the out-of-town storage facility of Leicester Museums. They are sometimes used to demonstrate to children the variety of mosses and as an interesting museum piece. They are quarter bound in now-faded red leather with marbled covers, labelled on the front "British Mosses" (Plate 2). One has the signature of Miss M. M. Atwood inside, in the same hand as is associated with the 1852 Whitebeam specimen shown in my August 2006 article. There are no liverworts: this may have been due to the lack of a reference book and helpful author, or reflect the collector's own interests, or a separate collection might have been lost. Given that Miss Atwood's

interest extended to lichens, it seems unlikely that she would have totally ignored the liverworts.

Even though many specimens predate it, the nomenclature and arrangement follows W. Wilson's *Bryologia Britannica* (1855), an identification handbook for British mosses. There are spaces for mosses she had not yet gathered or had provided by other collectors. The typeface of the printed labels of species names and authorities does not match Wilson's book. They might have been cut out from a corresponding checklist or herbarium label book designed for the purpose, such as existed for the vascular plants. I have not traced it, so perhaps the printing was done specially for her. If so, "*British Mosses: compiled from Wilson's Bryologia Britannica*" becomes the full and proper title of her collection.

A curator has numbered the specimens sequentially as 873. They are securely glued on one side of each sheet. Many species are represented by multiple collections, either her own, or provided by correspondents. A few added at the end (and not affixed in the appropriate systematic places) are later additions from the Thirsk Natural History Society Botanical Exchange Club, the society that effectively kept the flame of the Botanical Society of London burning after its dissolution in 1856, and which itself literally burnt out in 1864.

There are about 200 specimens collected by Miss Atwood, of which about 75 are from the Avon Gorge, about a third of the total moss species known there, and the oldest substantial collection surviving from there. With few exceptions she collected the Avon Gorge specimens between March 1853 and January 1856. Other collecting sites in the Bristol region were Redland Court, the cemetery at Arno's Vale (1855), Stapleton Mill, Sea Mills, Brandon Hill, Black Down on the Mendips, but generally as single specimens. Most of the rest of her own are from Cardiganshire, Devon or Herefordshire and have similar collection dates. The earliest date I noted, for a *Sphagnum* species, was August 1848 and is from near Shrewsbury. The latest, *Hypnum* (now *Amblystegium*) *serpens*, was collected near Bath in 1861.

There are about 100 specimens from Cheltenham collected by H. Beach. These may represent an important set of vouchers for his *Mosses of the Cheltenham District*, a paper read before the local scientific society in 1861. He also collected *Trichostomum crispulum* on St Vincent's Rocks in May 1857. Miss Atwood did not have her own specimen from there.

None of the specimens are from other Bristol botanists such as G. H. K. Thwaites, H. O. Stephens and C. E. Broome, all of whom could have educated her in the lower plants of the area, had she been active a few years earlier. Thwaites had published a list of Bristol mosses in 1843. A few of his duplicates can be found in contemporary collections, and a handful of his records are cited in Wilson's book. He left Bristol for Sri Lanka in 1849, and though a corresponding member of our Society, he never returned. Stephens' equivalent albums of fungi, which I described in the BNS Bulletin for April 2007, go - with one exception - up to September 1848. Broome was more dedicated to mycology and lived in Bath after a short residence in Clifton around 1847.



Plate 3 A typical page from Miss Atwood's *British Mosses*. For description, see the text. C. M. Lovatt, September 2006.

Plate 3 shows a typical page from Miss Atwood's moss books, sheet 276 (i.e. page 76 in volume 2). At the top, there is the printed label and notes on nomenclature. The specimens are pasted down, in an arrangement regardless of year of collection. The day of the month is not noted - making reconstruction of her travels more difficult - but the locality and collector are clearly stated, all in Miss Atwood's hand. Original labels were not retained - except for the appended Thirsk specimens - and the annotations are written directly onto the sheets of the books.

This sheet of *Hypnum* (now *Brachythecium*) *rutabulum*, has specimens from Leigh Woods, March 1853 (top centre) and St Vincent's Rocks, May 1853 (centre right). The third of her specimens is from Harpford Wood, Devon, June 1853 (top left). She collected about a

dozen mosses there, and also apparently gathered lichens. The four specimens from other collectors are all dated 1847 or 1848. J. G. Baker (lower left) was the distributor of the Thirsk Club mentioned above but, like Miss Atwood, apparently only joined the Botanical Society of London in the early 1850's. These are either collectors' duplicates acquired later, or were the very reference material from which she learnt her skills.

### **References to Miss Atwood and her interest in mosses**

In the historical account in his *Flora of Bristol* (1912) White refers to Miss Atwood as a prominent *muscologist*, suggesting that her field was the mosses rather than the two groups of bryophytes, the mosses and liverworts. I can only assume that this description was based on his botanical chit-chats with Thomas Bruges Flower thirty years later. Flower and Miss Atwood were the two substantial contributors to Horace Swete's *Flora Bristolensis* (1854).

The equivalent historical account in the *Flora of Gloucestershire* (1948) instead describes her as a *capable* muscologist. This is probably a fairer description. It adds that she corresponded with H. Beach, the Cheltenham bryologist. As indicated above, there are about 100 of his mosses from the Cheltenham area in Miss Atwood's collection. Any surviving correspondence would be most interesting. There may well also be some letters amongst Wilson's archives (Natural History Museum, London and elsewhere). I am not aware of any of Miss Atwood's moss records appearing in print in her lifetime.

In 1964 F. (Freddie) A. Sower, who like Miss Atwood had a deep interest in bryophytes and lichens, described the acquisition of the albums by Leicester Museums some years earlier. Records indicate that the books were bought for a few pounds after they were brought to their attention. Sower suggested that many of the localities from where the specimens were collected were those in Wilson's book. This does not apply to the Atwood and Beach specimens, but they form less than half of the collection. Wilson did in fact advertise in his book that he could sell 400 species at twenty shillings a hundred, and the albums do include a number of specimens attributed to him. Perhaps this was how the bulk of the collection was compiled rather than by exchanges between the collectors.

Joan Appleyard's *Bryophyte Flora of North Somerset* (1970), included a good number of records of Miss Atwood's, but of course they are only from the Somerset side of the Avon Gorge. They often represent first known records for the vice-county. Hence my visit in September 2006 to add to my draft historical list of Avon Gorge mosses.

### **Conclusion**

Miss Atwood's three moss volumes, a fortunate survival especially with her photograph, are a fine recollection of her interest in the mosses during the 1850's. I can find no connection with those who, had she been active a decade earlier or later, would have recognised their equal. There is, I suspect, more to be discovered on how she gained this skill in her early middle age. The books are more delightful than Stephens' musty fungi affixed with rusty pins, but they cannot match the handiwork, originality or persistence shown by Miss Jane Stewart Powell of Henbury in the six volumes of Bristol plants and insects she painted between 1833 and 1850 (Bristol University, in the Botany/ Zoology library when I last saw them). Her botanical contributions were taken up by Swete too. Did all these people only meet in his book?

My next article on Miss Atwood will cover her family circumstances, and what I can reconstruct of her other natural history collections and affiliations and how they fit in with her mosses. 1856 (in which she was photographed) was a bad year for the family.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Curator, Dr Anthony Fletcher, a prominent lichenologist, for accommodating me at the Leicestershire Museums out-of-town archives and for obtaining general permission for the use, duly acknowledged, of my photographs of their accession.

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