

HUGH NEVILLE DIXON (1861-1944)

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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/>

Bryological career

Dixon was a leading British authority on mosses before the Second World War. His *Student's Handbook of British Mosses* went through three editions between 1896 and 1924, and remained an indispensable guide for many decades after that. He was a founding member of the Moss Exchange Club in 1896, and became the British Bryological Society's first president in 1923.

He knew the European moss flora at first hand, often travelling with his friend William Nicholson (who was particularly interested in liverworts), and also studied bryofloras from lands still further distant, as evidenced by his *Studies in the Bryology of New Zealand (1913-29)*.

His bryological herbarium (both of British and foreign material) is at the Natural History Museum in London, and the South London Botanical Institute has other plants he collected. 708 of his specimens are at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff.

Family background and biography

Hugh Dixon's parents were Robert Walker Dixon (1833->1891) and Susan (*née* Goodman, 1830-1885). Robert Walker Dixon was a son of Robert Walker Dixon the elder (1804-1858) and Hannah Butler. Hugh's father and grandfather were both farmers and flour-millers at Wickham Bishops, Witham, Essex, where Robert Walker Dixon Sr. went into partnership with his elder brother Benjamin. Robert Sr.'s younger son, Thomas Butler Dixon (1835-1905) also became a miller and farmer in the district of Witham.

Hugh's great-grandfather, Benjamin (died 1813) was a miller too, but styled himself "gent." by the end of his life. He married Ann Walker at Norwich in 1799 [was she related to the Reverend Richard Walker (1791-1870), author of *Flora Oxon* in 1833, who was born in Norwich?].

With several successive generations of millers and farmers, the Dixons were well connected in their way of life, and Robert Walker Dixon the younger presumably met his future wife Susan Goodman through business connections in the corn trade, for she was a daughter of Joseph Goodman (1799-

1844), a miller and farmer in partnership with Potto Brown, a well-known miller, farmer and philanthropist at Wyton and Houghton near Huntingdon.

Susan and Robert married in 1858 and had three sons and three daughters. Of the daughters, two died in infancy, but the eldest, Helen Walker Dixon (born in 1865) lived to a ripe age. The eldest son was Harold Goodman Dixon (1859-1893). Harold went to Cambridge University in 1877 and progressed to a medical training at Guy's Hospital in London, but he became ill, and was still a medical student at the time of the Census in 1891, when he was living on his own means at Shanklin in the Isle of Wight, where his sister Helen Walker Dixon nursed him. He died at Shanklin in 1893, aged only 33.

Hugh was the second son, and after schooling at Witham and Southgate (North London) he followed his elder brother to Cambridge, where he read classics and Charles Cardale Babington, the professor of botany, encouraged his botanical interests. Dixon had been interested in natural history since childhood, and was clearly taking keen interest in bryophytes by his time at Cambridge, for he found the rare *Tortula vahliana* at nearby Cherry Hinton.

Hugh also had an uncle on his mother's side of the family at Cambridge – Neville Goodman (1831-1890). Neville had originally followed his father Joseph into the milling business, but went up to Cambridge as a student in 1862, and subsequently coached in natural sciences there. He had an entomological collection. In 1858 Neville Goodman married Maria Cunliffe, daughter of Roger Cunliffe, banker and chief cashier at the Bank of England.

Robert and Susan Dixon's youngest son was Rollo Havee Dixon (born 1862). He was born deaf-mute, and became a market-gardener at Rotherfield near Crowborough in Sussex. Later he moved to Fordingbridge in Hampshire, where his father Robert Walker Dixon also lived.

Living with his deaf brother and mastering sign-language as a child stood Hugh in good stead for his future career as a teacher of deaf and dumb children. Indeed, Dr Thomas Arnold taught Rollo at his school for the deaf and dumb in Northampton, which was the very school at which Hugh began his teaching career after leaving Cambridge in 1883. He succeeded Dr Arnold as principal the following year, and remained in post until his retirement in 1914, aged 53.

In 1890 Hugh married Mary Pressland (1860-1943), a native of Northampton. At the time of the census in 1871 her father was a draper, but he later brokered stocks and shares. Hugh and Mary had a son, Neville Goodman Dixon (1893-1900), who did not survive childhood. Indeed, despite Rollo's handicap, he was the only one of the three sons to see his own children grow up.

Dixon was Secretary of the Northamptonshire Naturalists Society and Field Club for 45 years, from 1886 until 1931.

He had a non-conformist upbringing, and became an active and prominent Congregationalist, acting as deacon at Doddridge Church in Northampton, where Dr Arnold was a pastor. Dixon also became Director of the London Missionary Society, to which he bequeathed £500. In his obituary of Dixon in the *Report of the British Bryological Society*, P.W. Richards also wrote that he "collected

flowering plants.... and was a keen gardener. His other interests included wood and metal-turning and county cricket...”

Dixon also wrote verse, and published small books of poetry containing his own beautiful illustrations.

His character and presence exuded great dignity, and he possessed considerable physical abilities. An article in *The Times* of December 24th 1948 states that he climbed every high mountain in Britain except one, and had also visited the Pyrenees, the Alps (with several Alpine ascents to his credit), Scandinavia, and the mountains of the east. He was a good skater, and walked over 50 miles in one day from Northampton to Leamington, Kenilworth and Coventry. He also climbed Skiddaw on his eightieth birthday and played hockey till he was over fifty.

These virtues of versatility and vigour characterised a number of men brought up in the Victorian age. Indeed, Dixon was one of the most prominent of a generation of British field-bryologists, born in or around the 1860s, whose numbers made creation of the Moss Exchange Club a viable proposition when they achieved adulthood thirty years later, and who, full of years, breathed their last and descended to the grave, as the Second World War drew a veil over their way of life.