

WILLIAM MITTEN (1819-1906)

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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

The lichenologist William Borrer (1781-1862) of Hurstpierpoint, Sussex guided Mitten's early botanical career, allowing him access to his extensive library, gave him an excellent microscope, and probably introduced him to or put him in touch with William Jackson Hooker. By 1843 Mitten had begun to study bryophytes, and to specialize in them by the late 1840s, no doubt encouraged by his two elder mentors. And in his turn, just as Borrer and Hooker helped him, Mitten was able to guide the early bryological career of William Edward Nicholson (1866-1944) who lived nearby in Lewes.

From the early 1850s he was recognized as a leading British authority on bryophytes. He studied foreign bryophytes as well as British species, and he received collections from many parts of the world for identification and naming. This was doubtless the means by which the explorer and naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) met Mitten's eldest daughter Annie, whom he married in 1866. Mitten also determined many of Richard Spruce's gatherings from South America, and this 650-page work was published as the *Journal of the Linnaean Society* in 1869.

For many years, Mitten's work prevented him from being able to botanise in the field except on Sundays (indeed, he travelled little and very rarely), but in 1851 appeared the first instalment of 'A List of all the Mosses and Liverworts hitherto observed in Sussex', published in the *Annals of Natural History* - a list which he never managed to complete. He also issued a lithographed list of British mosses in 1866.

Mitten bequeathed his entire bryological collection of 50,000 packets (and including many beautiful drawings and other archival material) to Mrs N.L. Britton, a keen American bryologist, who arranged for it to be purchased for the herbarium at New York Botanic Gardens. Further plants, letters, and notebooks are at Kew.

Family background and biography

William Mitten was born at Hurstpierpoint, Sussex on November 30th 1819, a son of William Mitten (1790-?1847) and Elizabeth (*née* Pett, 1789).

He became apprenticed to Mr Saxby, a chemist at Lewes, and during this period developed an interest in botany. He left Lewes for London, where he assisted a wholesale chemist named Yates, and was still in London in 1843, but subsequently returned to Hurstpierpoint.

Hooker offered him the curatorship of the herbarium at Kew in 1849, but by that time he had a young family to support, and he decided to continue in business at Hurstpierpoint, where he took over a chemist's business that he held until his death. Nevertheless, for many years the collections of bryophytes received at Kew were passed to Mitten for identification and description.

In 1844 Mitten married Ann (or Annie) Jordan (1812/15->1906) in Abbots Ripton, Huntingdonshire, and they had four daughters, all of whom were born at Hurstpierpoint: Annie (1845/6-1914), Rose Elizabeth (born c.1848), Flora (1850), and Bessie Jordan (1854).

Flora became a pharmaceutical chemist like her father, whom she assisted, and succeeded him in the family business when he died, aged 86, on July 27th 1906.