

# John Stackhouse (1742 – 1819)

John Stackhouse was born in 1742 at Trehane, Cornwall, the son of William Stackhouse, rector of St Erne, and his wife Catherine Williams, a descendent of Hugh de Courtenay, the first Earl of Devon. John matriculated from Exeter College, Oxford, on 20 June 1758 and was elected to a fellowship of the college in 1761, but left the university two years later when he inherited the Pendarves property in Cornwall. To further his interest in seaweeds, he travelled around the Mediterranean for two or three years, studying marine biology.

After his return home he divided his time between the Pendarves estates and St Erne, and in 1772 met his future wife Susanna Acton, the only daughter of Edward Acton of Acton Scott in Shropshire. The next year on a boating excursion to St Michael's

Mount they decided to build a house on the coast, both for the view and to enable John to pursue his seaweed investigations. They married on 21 April 1773 and lived in their large Georgian mansion where John continued his botanical interests. He leased land above what is now known as Stackhouse Cove, obtained permission from Susanna's father to use the family name, and around 1775 built Acton Castle, with special tanks for marine algae.

He was a contemporary of Sir Joseph Banks and an early member of the Linnean Society. His major published work *Nereis Britannica* (1795–1801) is a large illustrated folio with botanical descriptions in English and Latin of the British marine plants, but the classification he devised was later superseded by a simpler system based on colour. His observations on the Dartford warbler were published by the Linnean Society, and he also worked on fungi and lichens.

In 1802 Stackhouse sold Acton Castle to Captain Bulkeley Praed, Nelson's navigator at the Battle of the Nile, and he and his wife went to Paris where they commissioned portraits and met Desfontaines and other French naturalists. He also published in Greek and Latin a commentary on the philosopher Theophrastus, Aristotle's pupil and successor as head of the Peripatetic school in the Lyceum.

John Stackhouse died at his home at 4 Edgar Buildings, Bath, on 22 November 1819, and his wife fourteen years later, survived by their two sons and two daughters. Their oldest son Edward William, who later inherited and assumed the name of the Pendarves estate, became a director of the Plymouth Company that financed the settlement of New Plymouth, New Zealand, where a street was named after him.

The herbarium specimens of John Stackhouse, some of which he gave to his friend and neighbour Sir John St Aubyn, survive in the Plymouth City Museum. *Stackhousia*, a genus of plants native mainly to Australia, and with one species in New Zealand, was named in his honour and described by James Edward Smith in *Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* in 1798. The original specimen was probably *Stackhousia viminea*, a slender plant collected at Sydney by John White, chief surgeon of the First Fleet sent from England to establish a convict settlement at Botany Bay.



## ***Stackhousia minima***

*Stackhousia minima* ('very small') forms a loose mat up to 1 metre across, of tangled wiry, partly underground stems and small erect branches with alternate, rather fleshy leaves, usually 4–8 mm long. In December–January its presence is betrayed by the fragrance of tiny solitary flowers, 5 mm diameter, mustard-yellow or flecked brownish, at the branch tips above the leaves. The fruit, which turn from yellow to brown as they ripen, tend to be more conspicuous. The species may be found from the Volcanic Plateau southwards in open well-drained turfy sites or sometimes in moist flushes, but is somewhat local in occurrence.