

# Dawson Turner (1775 – 1858)

**D**awson Turner, banker, botanist and antiquary, was born in Great Yarmouth on the coast of Norfolk, England on 18 October 1775, the eldest of the three surviving children of James Turner, merchant and banker, and his wife Elizabeth, the only daughter of John Cotman, merchant and former mayor of Yarmouth, and relative of artist John Sell Cotman.

Dawson was educated at North Walsham grammar school and then at Barton Bendish, where his interest in botany was fostered. Intended for the church, he was admitted to Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1792, but left shortly before his father's death in 1794. In 1796 he joined Gurney and Turner's Bank in Yarmouth, and in the same year he married Mary Palgrave of Yarmouth and Coltishall. Of their eleven children, six daughters and two sons survived infancy.



## ***Dawsonia superba***

*Dawsonia superba* ('magnificent, exalted'), our tallest ground-dwelling moss, sometimes reaches a height of 50 cm, and a patch of it resembles a clump of young pine seedlings. The main stem is unbranched, and except at the base, is surrounded by numerous narrow leaves 20–35 mm long, "Fruiting" plants have a stout terminal capsule on a relatively short seta, with a peristome like a plug of cotton wool. *Dawsonia superba* is widespread in New Zealand, forming small colonies on humid forest floors, often on free-draining hummocks, and is also found in Australia and New Guinea.

A serious and studious man, Turner spent his days at work downstairs in Bank House, and the evenings upstairs pursuing his scholarly interests, financed by an ample inheritance and shrewd bank management, and assisted by his talented and dedicated family. Initially his main passion was botany, especially mosses, lichens and algae, and between 1800 and 1820 he published a number of papers and several volumes of magnificently illustrated botanical works. However, over the years botany gave way to his other interests. Bank House was adorned with a growing collection of paintings, and his library expanded to many thousands of volumes, manuscripts and letters, which then prompted his writing of further articles, pamphlets and substantial volumes.

Turner's eldest daughter Maria married William Jackson Hooker, one of the foremost botanists of the day, and his other daughters in turn married men with similar interests to his own. Family harmony disintegrated when his wife died in 1850, and a year later he married at Gretna Green a widow considerably younger in age and more humble in background, Rosamund Matilda Duff, née Neave. He became estranged from his family, there were disagreements with his banking partners, and he lost many friends. He left Yarmouth and moved to the London area where he auctioned off over half of his collections and stored much of the rest. When his health began to fail, a family reconciliation was made. His wife nursed him fondly after he suffered a stroke, and he partially recovered, but another stroke resulted in his death on 20 June 1858.

Much of the material from his collections is now in the British Library, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and Trinity College, Cambridge. The genus *Dawsonia*, represented in New Zealand by the giant moss *Dawsonia superba*, was described in 1846 by botanist Robert Brown, who wrote, "I have named this remarkable genus in honour of my esteemed friend Dawson Turner, Esq., a gentleman eminently distinguished in every part of the cryptogamic botany and from whom, after he has finished the incomparable work on *Fuci* in which he is now engaged, we may expect a general history of Mosses." The two friends died within ten days of each other.