

J.GORDON BLOWER AS INSPIRATION FOR LOCAL DISTRIBUTION MAPPING OF MILLIPEDES: A PERSONAL VIEW

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, I published, *The Millipedes, Centipedes and Woodlice of the Sheffield Area* through the Sorby Natural History Society of Sheffield, South Yorkshire (Richards 1995). This publication presented an introduction for beginners to the three groups, with identification keys to all 70 species known locally at that time, plus distribution maps for each species at a 1km grid square level.

The published mapping area consisted of fifteen 10km squares centred on Sheffield. The maps were based on data gathered across the recording area of the Sorby Society (Figure 1).

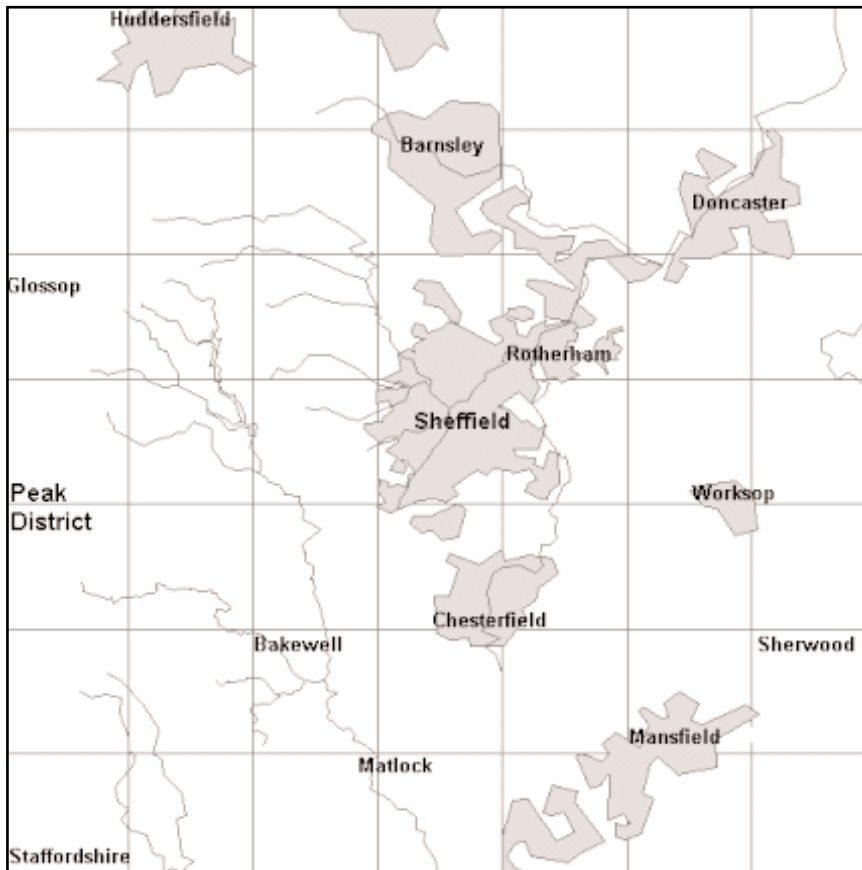


Figure 1. The area covered by the Sorby Natural History Society

This area included many sites to the east of Manchester frequented by Gordon Blower in which several of his students also undertook research projects on millipedes. Subsequent results also contributed data to this mapping scheme. An example would be the records of *Melogona scutellare* from Derbyshire dales (Figure 2).

The Millipedes, Centipedes and Woodlice of the Sheffield Area could not have been produced without the help and inspiration of Gordon Blower and other members of the (then) British Myriapod Group (BMG). This combined contribution derives from 3 main areas of influence:

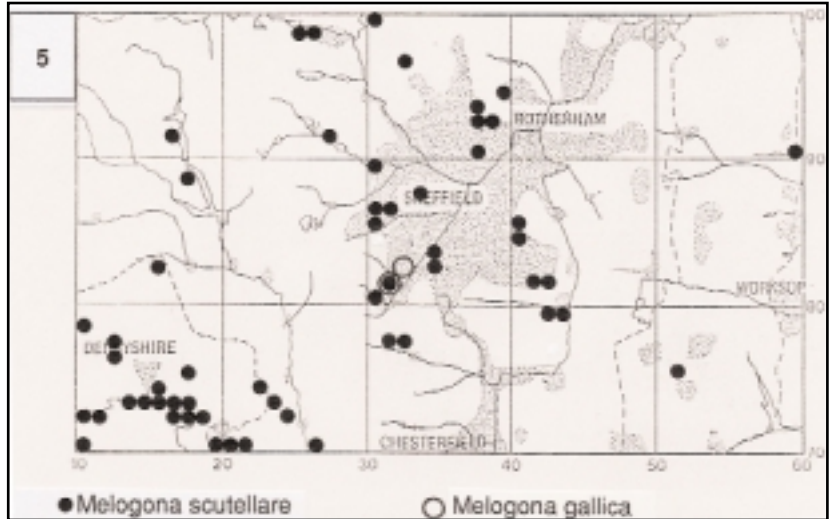


Figure 2. Distribution of *Melogona* species in the Sorby area

1. The development of identification skills through patient mentoring
2. The essential role of the monograph, “*Millipedes*” By Gordon Blower (1985) for identification
3. The identification or checking of specimens

DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS

During 1984, I undertook an introductory field course on millipede identification at Warwickshire Museum, led by Douglas Richardson, the national recorder for these animals and a long standing member of the BMG. Using a key compiled by Adrian Rundle and reduced for use in the Yorkshire area only, Douglas introduced the joys of studying a readily identified group of largely overlooked, but fascinatingly varied animals. So many new county records were found in one weekend, that it dawned very quickly that this was a group in which real discoveries could easily be made. They also provided a very obvious collecting “niche” for anyone wishing to move on from the more obvious vertebrates and insects of popular natural history. Motivation for collecting was therefore not an issue. Problems with identification were restricted to a small number of species and *all* data would make a noticeable contribution to current knowledge. The Yorkshire key also became the basis for the Sheffield identification guide when it was re-written with new illustrations.

Later, Douglas Richardson invited me to attend the annual field meeting of the BMG where I first met Gordon Blower. These meetings more than anything else established my interest in millipedes. Without exception, every member of this informal group was (and still is) most welcoming and eager to share their knowledge with a novice. The sharing of field skills and techniques and the experience of learning direct identification of living animals was invaluable and also unavailable elsewhere.

I made a point of attending these meetings annually and continued to be taught not only about millipedes but also about all aspects of ground invertebrate zoology. Any knowledge I have of centipedes and woodlice also derives entirely from these occasions. The changing venues meant that on each occasion I was introduced to a slightly different fauna, without the number of new species being overwhelming. Again, members were always happy to bring unusual species to my attention to add to my repertoire.

SYNOPSIS 35

Blower’s 1985, completely updated and expanded re-write of his 1958 *British Millipedes* is essential for the accurate identification of the British Diplopod fauna. Without this to guide enthusiasts through the intricacies of millipede genitalia, there would be no recording scheme at all. The foundations of the Sheffield database were records drawn from local surveys of the mid-1980s after the publication of Synopsis 35. The few previous records were provided via the “Yorkshire key” which in turn derived from the original 1958 synopsis.

Additionally, Gordon Blower's 1985 work was the source of many of the illustrations included in the Sheffield atlas. He kindly gave permission to use re-drawn illustrations for use within the keys and introductory sections.

TELL ME I'M WRONG!

The role of BMG members was particularly critical in the confirmation of identifications. The reassurance that my interpretation of Blower's text was accurate enabled the compilation of a reliable reference collection. This not only provided a reference for my own work, but as part of Sheffield Museum's collections, provides a lasting voucher resource for a wider community of future researchers.

Over an initial period of two or three years, Douglas Richardson probably checked every specimen I ever collected. He always took the time to write detailed explanations of where I might have gone wrong and included off-prints and papers that would add to my knowledge.

After some correspondence regarding the number of ocelli in *Brachychaeteuma* species, Gordon Blower was particularly helpful in establishing my ability to identify these troublesome and somewhat dubious species. With alternating sips of tea and a glance down a microscope he guided me around their morphology.

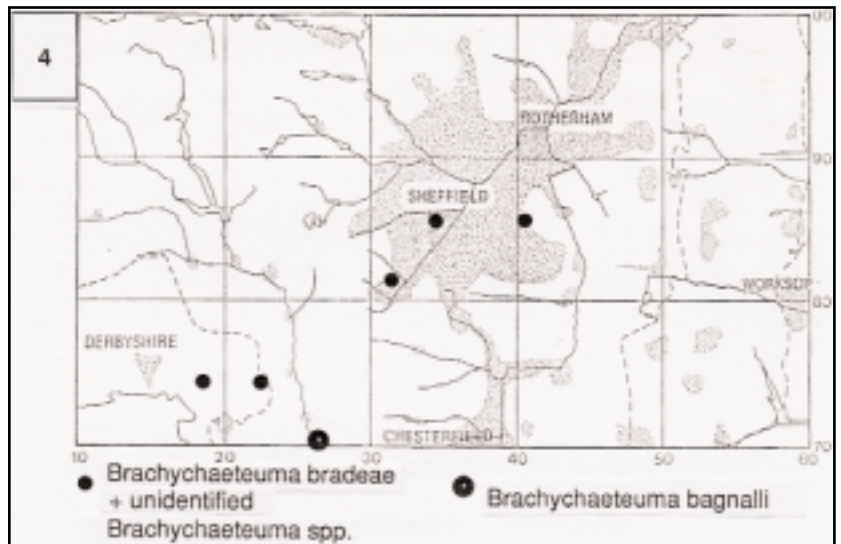


Figure 3. Distribution of *Brachychaeteuma* in the Sorby area

MILLIPEDES: THE NEW LEPIDOPTERA!

Millipedes may never quite hold the popularity of birds or dragonflies, but their raised profile is in no small part attributable to Gordon Blower. His many years of collecting and research culminated in the publication of the first standard British work on the subject (Blower 1958). This and subsequent spin off keys and guides have established a firm launch pad for the ongoing recording and study of these animal. This places the British Isles as one of the most well recorded countries in the world for millipedes and other associated groups.

The British Myriapod Group, founded by Gordon and for which he edited the "Bulletin", provided another tier of support for the budding myriapodologist. As an organisation and as individuals this provided the greatest stimulus for recording effort and is responsible for untold influence in subsequent environmental research.

The trail of influence concludes at a local level for me through the derived ability to further popularise the subject with a layman's guide to the fauna of my own region. The result of this sequence of events is that in Sheffield at least, there are over 12,000 new records for not only millipedes, but centipedes, woodlice, pseudoscorpions and harvestmen as well. These consequences can also be traced to many other places and indicate something of the enormous influence that Gordon's knowledge and enthusiasm has had.

REFERENCES

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