

ERIC GEORGE PHILP (1930 – 2013)

Eric Philp was a remarkable all-round naturalist, perhaps the best in the country, for whom botany was only one of his interests. No-one can have known Kent better: his recording must have led him into every tetrad in the administrative county several times, even by boat when otherwise inaccessible. Born in 1930 at Crayford, West Kent, and so a Kentish man (although otherwise he was not particularly forthcoming in acknowledging metropolitan vice-county 16), he lived in the county almost all his life.

One of his earliest memories was of breeding out caterpillars in jam jars – he went through two generations of Magpie Moth before he was five – and from this developed an interest in birds, beetles and a multitude of other aspects of natural history. As a child, he was a wartime evacuee in Stafford. An unexpected consequence was that a scholarship stream for grammar school was not afforded to evacuees, and although he passed his exams for attendance at the Maidstone Technical School for Boys, the school did not provide foreign language teaching, which was required for university matriculation, and his academic future finished with the end of school. On leaving, he worked for his father in his grocery business. During National Service (1948-1950) he undertook what he described as an overseas posting (on the Isle of Wight). On demobilisation he started visiting various bird observatories, obtaining his bird ringer's licence. Around that time, he bought a Robinson mercury-vapour light trap and began boosting his moth collection. He also met Dr. A.M. Masee of East Malling, a distinguished entomologist, who influenced Eric towards the study of plant bugs (Hemiptera) and beetles (Coleoptera). On Dr Masee's death, he took over from him the Kent recordership of Hemiptera. Eric also eventually became Kent Coleoptera recorder, a President of the British Entomological &

Natural History Society and a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society.

In April 1956, he married Dorothy, at St Faith's Church, Maidstone. In December of that year he began work at Maidstone Museum, where he was Keeper of Natural History until his retirement in 1993. He was responsible for answering all queries on natural history and during his first year he worked hard at bringing his then limited knowledge of botany up to a standard with which he could deal with public enquiries. So far as natural history was concerned, although he obtained Botany and Zoology A levels when first at the Museum, he was very much self-taught. Eric had firm ideas about what a museum was for, and that it should afford a centre for reference collections, records and an identification service for whatever might be brought in. The establishment of a County Biological Records and Archive Centre at the Museum in 1973-1974 consolidated this view, as also his building up the Maidstone Museum herbarium into a significant reference source, starting from about a hundred herbarium sheets in a cupboard and a pile of newspapers enclosing specimens from Francis Rose.

Museum developments in later years, which sacrificed scientific knowledge to entertaining display, were not congenial to him and this, coupled with an occasional antipathy to institutional organisation, meant that he felt that some of the purpose of his work was being left behind. Once he had retired, in 1993, recording for the Centre stopped (until re-incarnated as the Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre in 2003). There was then no-one who could deal with natural history enquiries and the only botanical records being gathered were then his own personal ones. Visiting the Museum after retirement, which he undertook regularly to continue in order to care for the herbarium, he would comment on the paucity of the residue of the collection of stuffed birds, many of which he had prepared or refurbished

during his tenure, and he was scathing as regards the gory modern educational dinosaur display. What reptile, he would say, had red blood, such as was displayed? This was distant from the educational displays which he had undertaken during his tenure, including fresh seasonal plant material and, at one time, a Grass Snake, which was temporarily housed in the bath at home. The plant displays proved more controversial than was expected when a member of public tipped off the police regarding a specimen labelled *Eupatorium cannabinum* (Hemp-agrimony) and the police arrived, looking for cannabis. Up to Eric's death he had been engaged in re-organising the herbarium holdings of *Hieracium* (Hawkweeds), in which he had a particular interest, so as to correspond with the taxa and sequence in Sell and Murrell's *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*.

Eric was involved in the establishment of the Kent Field Club as a founder member in 1955 and, as it became apparent that scientific recording and conservation management were not always readily combined in the same organisation, he was also party to the formation in 1958 of the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, now the Kent Wildlife Trust, reviewing the constitutions of other fledgling conservation organisations for their suitability for Kent adoption. His role as regards the Trust he felt was not recognised in later years, and it was particularly galling if wardens failed to recognise him and sought to discourage him from investigating terrain in a Trust reserve. He was a founder member and Honorary Vice-President of the Kent Geologists' Group. He was also a founder member of the Kent Ornithological Society (1961). His interest in birds was life-long and led to his appointment in 1978 as the Honorary Swan Master for Maidstone Borough Council, pursuant to a series of royal charters from 1599, which entitle the Borough to keep and mark swans and cygnets on part of the River Medway (see Colour Section, Plate 4). Although Eric was a skilled bird-ringer, this did not save him from inadvertently joining an unusually spirited swan in the waters of Leybourne Lakes on one occasion. He was a

good friend of the Wild Flower Society, which he joined in 1960, and encouraged the Society to start offering local meetings, for which he was always willing to supply a Kent venue. His WFS Kent weekend meetings in the 1970s and 1980s were memorable, not least in ensuring that no-one got lost down the lanes, as everyone travelled by Maidstone Council coach. He also led meetings for the BSBI from the 1970s to the 1990s and he served on its Records Committee.

In his younger days, he botanised with Francis Rose, traversing Kent on the back of Francis' motor cycle. Francis had long projected a flora of Kent, along conventional lines, which was never brought to the point of publication. In some respects this cast a shadow over publication of county botanical records, but Eric had become interested in a different approach, following John Dony's *Flora of Hertfordshire* (1967), in which a county flora was mapped using records at tetrad level. He suggested to the Kent Field Club that a tetrad survey could be carried out by members, which would result in a set of distribution maps at Maidstone Museum. The Club adopted this in 1970, anticipating set-up costs of £20 and running costs of £5 for each year of the project, estimated at five years and leaving open whether the results would eventually be published. In the event, the timescales were too ambitious, and although 204,420 records had been gathered by the end of 1975, they served to show that there were still many gaps; so the project ran from 1971 to 1980 inclusive. Eric became Hon. Director of Field Studies for the Club in 1970 and in a couple of years had succeeded Francis Rose as Club vascular plant recorder. The BSBI also in 1971 appointed Eric as recorder for Kent, vice counties 15 and 16. He was kept busy, not just with recording, but general co-ordination of the county flora project (the correspondence forms a large series of folders at the Museum); and when publication was decided upon and the maps were to be prepared, Eric inserted individually the 265,511 dots required. During this period he had also to cope with the re-establishment of his department following the major fire at the Museum

in 1977, which damaged much of the natural history collection, although sparing the herbarium. The re-opening of the Museum coincided – to the day – with the Club's publication of his *Atlas of the Kent flora* in 1982. The *Atlas* was highly regarded and also very successful in its sales. It helped place the finances of the Club on a strong footing.

Eric was elected President of the Kent Field Club (1990-91), but subsequently there was a passage during which relations became somewhat strained, initially due to the appointment of various referees and recorders in disciplines in which Eric was expert, but without consulting him. It was perhaps characteristic of him that he was generally able to maintain amicable relationships with individuals, whilst being critical about the organisation to which they belonged.

As he said in the introduction to *A new atlas of the Kent flora*, completion of the first *Atlas* was followed by a vow never to become involved in another. However, the habit of recording was too strong to be denied, although he was uncomfortable about being involved again in all the administration of co-ordinating a survey team. For the first *Atlas*, there were people who had undertaken to record a particular square or squares but were taking an unconscionable time to produce a few records, when he could visit the area and collect many more in just a couple of hours. There were those who thought that the invitation to provide records was an opportunity to send their life list for an area, rather than a list during a survey period. There was the discovery that some recorders were persistently misidentifying certain taxa. It was in many ways easier to do it oneself, and so he did. Starting from scratch, re-mapping the Kent flora began as a personal exercise in 1991 and expanded following his retirement in 1993, when he was then able to devote three days a week to botanising, increasing to four days in summer time. Wherever he went, including visits to friends and relatives, he was accompanied by a recording card. By choice he took no holidays and over the period to 2005 he assembled a very large set of records

which he had seen and verified personally and which was capable of constituting a new *Atlas*.

The Kent Field Club had expressed willingness to undertake publication again, but the road to achieving this was lengthy and caused frustration. More than once, Eric suggested that he might be tempted to give up and destroy all the records on his computer. Eventually, with the provision by the Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre of dedicated assistance in preparation of maps and layout, publication got under way, but it was not until 2010, five years after close of survey, that *A new atlas of the Kent flora* appeared. It was one of the first of the 'second generation' of county tetrad map Atlases, so enabling comparison with the previous *Atlas* for the trends of plant distribution. With over 250,000 records, it was an immense task for a single person. Eric was author of numerous books, papers and notes in various natural history and horticultural journals on a remarkably diverse range of topics, but his two atlases will stand as monuments of his achievements.

Eric was a renowned field botanist and excellent company on expeditions, when he regularly botanised with friends such as Jim Bevan, Mervyn Brown, Doug Grant, Peter Heathcote and Brian Woodhams. Despite this recognised expertise, he did not seek to impose his learning, but was happy to discuss critical taxa and consider others' views. In field meetings, he came across as a gentle unassuming man, with plenty of time for beginners' questions. He explained his determinations with great clarity and patience. The other side of this coin was his deposit in Maidstone Museum herbarium of a great range of specimens as permanent evidence of his views on the naming of finds. His energy in the field reflected the fact that he had been a school champion at 440 yards and ran as a Maidstone Harrier in his youth. Although he slowed down in the 1990s, his vigour was restored by a heart by-pass operation in 1995 (and, incorrigibly, he recorded plants both on the way to, and coming back from, hospital). The last botanical field meeting which he led was in October 2011 at Oare Marshes for the

Kent Botanical Recording Group, of which he was President (2011-2013), in which he gave a memorably complete account of *Salicornia* (Glassworts) in Kent.

His knowledge of the county and its records was phenomenal. One could name a place and he could give its tetrad number without reference to a map. Although his records were made by reference to tetrads, one could ask whereabouts in a tetrad an uncommon plant had been seen, and in most cases he could remember the number of visits made to the tetrad, the routes taken and the location of the plant. Even apparent uncertainty might reflect accuracy: when asked about a particular site for *Chenopodium vulvaria* (Stinking Goose-foot), he replied that it could be in either of two monads – it transpired when this was checked out on the ground that there was a small scattering over a few square metres in both monads bisected by the grid line!

Following retirement, he sought to concentrate on plants, birds, beetles and plant bugs and to cut down on other things. “The problem is”, he said, “that everything to do with natural history is of interest”. In 2009 he relinquished his botanical vice county recorderships and not long afterwards, ill-health

imposed some limitations on his activities. After treatment for bladder cancer in 2012 he suffered a stroke and was hospitalised. He bore this with fortitude and returned home for a week at Christmas before relapsing. He remained alert until his death on 8th January 2013 and, although his hospital window had only a view of another building, he started his 2013 recording list with two birds (towards what would be his normal annual list of 200 or so).

He is commemorated in the plant world, first by a Hazel on his grave, a natural burial in grounds which are to become a nature reserve, and secondly by *Rumex ×philpii*, a cross between *R. patientia* (Patience Dock) and *R. conglomeratus* (Clustered Dock), discovered by Eric near Snodland in 1978. He will be much missed by family, including Dorothy, their son Stephen and their three grandchildren; by friends, the county and national botanical community; and by naturalists in all the natural history disciplines in which he was so well known.

GEOFFREY KITCHENER



Eric Philp with swans by the River Medway, near Yalding in 2011.
Photo © Dorothy Philp