

James Iliff, FRAM
(1923 – 2014)
(Alumnus and former Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music)

It is with great sadness that I have to report the passing of James Iliff, aged 91, on 11th July 2014. He had suffered from serious sight loss in recent years, which curtailed his botanical activities and hindered his musical composition. He had become increasingly frail over the previous months. The following is based upon the encomium which I had the honour of giving at James' funeral at Capel-y-Groes, Cilycwm, on 21st July. Additional accolades were given by family members as well as by several of his past students of the Royal Academy of Music, who also punctuated the service with heartfelt musical tributes.

James and Mary settled in Cilycwm, Carmarthenshire, in the 1960s and took advantage of the beautiful countryside to the fullest extent, not just by frequently walking in the area but by getting to know the wild plants that they came across. They soon became acquainted with Mrs Irene Vaughan, my predecessor as County Botanical Recorder, who fostered their interest, so much so that when I took over as Recorder in 1978 they quickly became valued and knowledgeable contributors of plant records.

I first met James on 12th June 1976, when I drove him and Mrs Vaughan to a BSBI meeting at Strumble Head, led by Tommie Warren Davis and Stephen Evans. I can remember vividly that the whole journey was in dense fog until we reached the Pembrokeshire coast, when brilliant sun broke through, which remained for the rest of the day. I was very much a botanical novice in those days and James was anxious to pass on his botanical knowledge in the same way as he had learnt much of his own knowledge from Mrs Vaughan. Somehow, this brilliant Pembrokeshire light reflected James' own inspired teaching and botanical abilities.

In 1982 I sent letters to everyone in Carmarthenshire and neighbouring counties

whom I thought might wish to help with the production of a Carmarthenshire Flora, about 100 in all. James responded in characteristic fashion (as I would learn later), with enthusiasm and great precision, questioning the feasibility of the project as well as the details of my proposed method, but also giving me great encouragement to proceed. Over the years James and Mary have recorded in all parts of the county but, in particular, have comprehensively covered all the tetrads in north-eastern Carmarthenshire, penetrating the most inaccessible mountain valleys and exposed summits as well as engaging the local farmers in conversation and encouraging them to conserve wildlife on their land.

One of James' most noteworthy contributions was the discovery in 1983 of the hybrid cinquefoil *Potentilla* × *italica* (*P. erecta* × *P. reptans*) (Upright Tormentil × Creeping Cinquefoil). It is a tribute to his botanical expertise that he was able to recognise such a cryptic plant, but its identity was verified by its chromosome count of $2n=28$ by Brenda Harold and Jack Ellis at Imperial College, London, who were able to confirm that it was new to science as a wild plant, although it had previously been created in the lab by artificially crossing the parent species. As far as I know, this remains the only record and is referred to in Stace! James wrote to me in 2010 saying "At the time of its discovery, it was in a deeply rutted track approaching the gate and the plant may have come on a wheel of an old grey 'Fergie' tractor. The original plant was destroyed shortly after its discovery by the replacement of the old tractor by a large modern one, which eroded the rutted track, together with the plant". However, it survives from a cutting grown-on by James and distributed to various authorities, who still have it in cultivation.

James had a particular interest in clubmosses, of which three species grow close to their house on Mynydd Mallaen but in few other places in the county. He and Mary scoured the moorland slopes, allowing them to map their distribution so accurately that, in 1991, he was able to write a paper for the Welsh Bulletin of the BSBI on 'The Clubmosses in NE Carmarthenshire', which was, and continues to be held as, an exemplary of amateur research making a great and profound contribution to the wider subject, so much so that the Countryside Council for Wales asked him and Mary to repeat the survey in 2002, as it was suspected that the plants had undergone severe decline due to changes in habitat management, including Bracken colonisation.

James was always good company and I value and look back with affection to the times when we had the opportunity to accompany him and Mary searching for clubmosses on the moors. Most recently this took the form of a car trip along forestry roads, stopping at all the sites where they had previously discovered plants and were anxious that we should also know where to find them.

In 1995 the local paper, the *Carmarthen Journal*, recognised the Iliffs' contribution to botany when *The Missing Mistletoe* made it to the front page, the text of which was mainly an account of the County Flora project!

Some species confused him, just as they do other botanists. In 1998 he wrote a short piece for *BSBI News*: 'Maddening mimics', in which he asked for tips from the readership on how to separate several confusing species pairs. But he had certainly got to grips with the South American Prickly Pears, another passion of his, which took him to the interior of Argentina, his research culminating in his authoritative account of them in 2002, in volume 6 of *Succulent Plant Research*.

Of course James brought his musical talent to our annual botanical recording weeks at Glynhir by giving impromptu recitals of,

among others, his beloved Scarlatti. Several other regular attendees are accomplished musicians and in 2007, James took it on himself to compose a short duet for bassoon and double-bass for Graeme Kay and Chris Cheffings. In tribute, Graeme and Chris were able to attend the funeral service, together with several other BSBI Glynhir participants.

Kath and I were extremely honoured and touched to receive as a wedding present, a product of another of his artistic talents, an oil painting of the Afon Merchon near their home at Eithin, which takes pride of place in our hall.

I am very sad that James never saw all his and Mary's botanical material come to be published in the County Flora. We have been working on this daunting task for a great many years now but, although it is well advanced, there is still much to do and several years will be needed to finish it. But let it be said that James' and Mary's invaluable contribution has earned them a very worthy place as leaders in local botanical study.

James and Mary were always together and our hearts go out to Mary in her loss and, of course, to all the family and friends. James will also be sorely missed among his botanical friends and Carmarthenshire botany will probably never again see such a prolific and enthusiastic supporter.

RICHARD PRYCE

References:

LIFF, J. (1991). 'The clubmosses in NE Carmarthenshire'. *BSBI Welsh Bulletin*, **51**: 11-23.

LIFF, J. (1998). 'Maddening mimics'. *BSBI News*, **79**: 43.

[LIFF, J. & M.]. (2002). *Vegetation surveys: Mynydd Mallaen, 2002*. Unpublished report to the Countryside Council for Wales.

A summary of James' life and musical achievements has been written by David Wright and is posted on the Web at <http://www.wrightmusic.net/pdfs/james-iliff.pdf>



James Iliff at Glynhir, v.c.44 in April 2004. Photo R.D. Pryce © 2004