
ANTHONY LEO PRIMAVESI

(1917–2011)

With the death of Tony Primavesi on 22 February 2011 we have lost another of our longstanding members who joined the BSBI in 1959.

Tony was born in Northampton on 18 December 1917 shortly after a German Zeppelin raid on the town. One of his earliest memories was the General Strike of 1926 when the trams were driven by volunteers with the windows protected by wire netting, and policemen walking the streets apprehensively in groups, never alone. His father was an ophthalmic optician, son of an Italian father and an English mother, Tony being the youngest of three children. The family had originally emigrated from Italy in the mid 19th century and set up business as watchmakers and jewellers in Bournemouth and Poole.

In 1926 the family moved to Newport Pagnell then a small village almost off the map. The house had extensive grounds in virtually open countryside with two rivers nearby. All this together with strong encouragement from his parents helped him to acquire an interest in nature, often examining through his father's microscope the pond life which he and his sister had collected. In 1927 he went as a boarder to Ratcliffe College, a Roman Catholic school near Leicester and thus began a long association with the college which, apart from a few short gaps, lasted for seventy-four years.

At the outbreak of war he was classed as unfit for military service because of the after-effects of rheumatic fever in childhood. During the war he was asked to return to Ratcliffe College and help out with various temporary teaching posts as members of staff had been called away for military service. During this period he also spent time at Rugby amongst other things studying for the Priesthood, having joined the Roman Catholic religious order The Institute of Charity (Rosminions) in 1936. Although health

problems prevented him from attaining the priesthood, he remained a brother of the Charity. He finally returned to Ratcliffe College in 1947 and was asked to fill in another temporary post teaching biology. At the time, apart from a rather vague knowledge of natural history, he was completely ignorant of the subject but by keeping a few pages ahead of the pupils he managed all right and in less than a year found himself head of the Biology Department, a post he held until 1981 before retiring from teaching in the following year. He was lucky in that when he started the biology syllabus was largely descriptive and physiology was in a primitive state. Before starting to teach, by courtesy of Professor Moon he spent some time in the laboratories at Leicester University. A by-product of this was being fired by Prof. Moon's enthusiasm for biology and Tony helped him with a fresh water zoological survey, joining him on many field excursions until about 1960. It was with the sponsorship of Professors Moon and Tutin that he was elected as Fellow of the Linnean Society in 1968.

Presumably inherited from his clock-making father he had some mechanical skills and in 1950 he also set up an engineering workshop at Ratcliffe and taught metalwork for several years, during which time he ground and figured a small reflecting telescope mirror, designed and constructed a rocking microtome, and a clock and mechanism for ringing the bells for the school timetable.

Through his teaching of biology it soon became evident that his main interest was botanical. He began to improve his knowledge of the British flora starting with what he could find in Leicestershire and joined the BSBI in 1959, before taking on responsibility for three ten kilometre squares and contributing records for the 1962 *Atlas of the British Flora*.

In 1967 Tony suggested to Ian Evans at the Leicestershire Museum that a new flora of Leicestershire was needed. When the committee had been set up Tony was elected secretary and later one of its editors. He in fact wrote all the systematic accounts for the Flora except those for *Rubus*, *Ulmus*, *Hieracium* and *Taraxacum* which were written by K.G. Messinger. The *Flora of Leicestershire* was eventually published in 1988.

In 1974 when the committee were attempting to assign responsibility for the various critical groups nobody seemed keen to take on roses, so in the end Tony volunteered to tackle them. This apparently fortuitous circumstance caused him to seek the help of the two then national authorities, Dr Ronald Melville of Kew and the Rev. Gordon Graham of County Durham and he soon became seriously interested in British *Rosa*. Following the death of Melville in 1986 he was appointed joint BSBI referee for *Rosa*. At this time the taxonomy of the genus was chaotic, the only authority was the unsatisfactory *A Revision of the British Roses* (Wolley-Dod, 1931) and when Gordon Graham was appointed by the BSBI to prepare a Handbook of British and Irish Roses Tony was accepted as joint author. There followed much intensive research the most important results of which were published in *Notes on some Rosa taxa as occurring in the British Isles* which was to typify some of the controversial names. This research was to set British *Rosa* on a sounder taxonomic basis which was first published in the *New Flora of the British Isles* (Stace, 1991) and in greater detail in *Roses of Great Britain and Ireland* (1993). During the preparation of the Handbook, a task which fell entirely on Tony's shoulders, was the examination of many thousands of herbarium specimens. These included the larger collections in the Natural History Museum, National Museum of Wales, the Irish National Herbarium at Dublin, Cambridge and Oxford Universities and many smaller collections elsewhere. He continued this work for many years after the publication of the Handbook so that eventually he had re-determined some 35000 specimens. In

1996 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science degree by the De Montfort University in recognition of his contribution to botany on a national level with *Rosa* and his work on the *Flora of Leicestershire*.

It was during the mid-1980s that I first became interested in roses and after initially sending specimens for determination to Gordon he advised me to send them to Tony, as he had more experience of the southern species. Shortly afterwards in 1988 I met Tony for the first time at a rose workshop at Leicester University. Over the following years I sent him many specimens, nearly all from Worcestershire and he was always very prompt in sending me the results usually in the form of long hand-written letters full of advice and explanations, with occasional diagrams and always together with plenty of encouragement; fortunately I have retained this valuable archive. At the beginning of the 1990s we began annual rose-hunting excursions and by the early part of this century we had visited much of the English midlands and parts of East Anglia and south Wales. One thing I will always remember was his encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of many of the small villages we passed through, particularly of those in Leicestershire.

After retiring Tony remained at Ratcliffe College for the next twenty years by which time all his contemporaries had either died or left and in 2001 he decided to move back to St. Marie's at Rugby where his room overlooked the rugby pitches of the famous school. Unfortunately, increasing physical frailty eventually prevented us from further field trips and failing eyesight forced him to retire as referee in 2004. We were then restricted to lunchtime visits to a local pub, which as usual were always enlightened by him quoting some of his favourite limericks or one or other of his vast collection of short, often slightly bawdy jokes. Following one or two short spells in hospital he finally moved to a small nursing home in Rugby where he was very comfortable during his last few weeks. Tony himself provided me with much of the above detail.

Selected Publications of A.L. Primavesi

- Primavesi, A.L. & Evans, P.A. (1988) *Flora of Leicestershire*. Leicester Museums.
- Gornal, R.J. & Primavesi, A.L. (1989). The British Rose Survey of 1953-54. *Watsonia* **17**: 356-359.
- Graham, G.G. & Primavesi, A.L. (1990). Notes on some *Rosa* taxa recorded as occurring in the British Isles. *Watsonia* **18**: 119-124.
- Primavesi, A.L. (1992). The *Rosa* herbarium of A.H. Wolley-Dod. *Watsonia* **19**: 137-139.
- Graham, G.G. & Primavesi, A.L. (1993). *Roses of Great Britain and Ireland*. Botanical Society of the British Isles, London.
- Cronk, Q.C.B. Marner, S.K. & Primavesi, A.L. (1995). Lectotypification of *Rosa rothschildii* Druce (Rosaceae). *Watsonia* **20**: 409-410.
- Maskew, R. & Primavesi, A.L. (2004). A re-examination of *Rosa* × *perthensis* Rouy. *Watsonia* **25**: 203-205.
- Maskew, R. & Primavesi, A.L. (2005). What is *Rosa alba* L.? *Watsonia* **25**: 412-413.

ROGER MASKEW

Tony Primavesi at the age of 90 [Photo first published in *BSBI News* **107**]