

## DAVID RIDLEY HUMPHREYS, MD, FRCP (1916 – 2011)

David was born in Birmingham, the eldest of three, to a father who was an insurance company manager. He was educated in Small Heath and Kings Heath, attending King Edward's Boys School where his academic talents won him a scholarship to Birmingham Medical School when he was seventeen. After further awards and prizes, he qualified as a doctor in 1938. His first post was at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, starting as a house physician, becoming the Resident Medical Officer in 1939 and running the pneumothorax clinic. With the outbreak of World War II he took on the admission of air raid casualties as well as teaching students and night-time fire-watching duties on the roof of the hospital. David also attended to military services cases and was appointed Penicillin Officer when this remedy was first used. It was at this time that he developed his career-long interest in chest medicine.

Through his studies and work, David met his wife-to-be, Helen Mason. They married in 1944 having met as medical students sharing a mutual passion for music. David was a keen amateur musician with a fine piano and then had the luck to obtain a second piano. Helen, a charming young doctor at the hospital, not only played the piano but was also a very good sight reader and, although very shy, David managed to invite her to come and try some piano duets. Romance blossomed with the music and a long lasting and fruitful partnership began.

In 1944 David did a course in tropical medicine, was commissioned into the Royal Army Medical Corps and in September 1945 was posted to India. As he set sail, Helen gave birth to twins, Caroline and Bridget, daughters he was not to see for two years. In India David went to Bikaner where he was in charge of about fifty beds for Japanese patients and acted as consultant for the Japanese Prison Camp Hospital. Later he served on a hospital ship, in the Indian General Hospital in

Calcutta and in Darjeeling and was once heard to casually mention dining, under the stars in a Maharaja's palace, in the company of the writer E M Forster.

On his return from India in 1948, just in time for the birth of the NHS, David was appointed as chest consultant at his beloved Queen Elizabeth Hospital and was introduced into the lives of his two year old daughters, who did not know the strange man suddenly living in their home. After the birth of two further daughters, Philippa and Nicola, family and working life left little time for botany, but it was always there on the sidelines. When Philippa was asked to take wild flowers to school there was a rather high standard, as David vied with other botanically minded parents to find the best specimens around the Birmingham area.

David joined the BSBI in 1964 and, having bought the derelict Knill Court on the borders of Radnorshire and Herefordshire in 1965, spent weekends there restoring the property and exploring the beautiful border country in which it lay. After retirement from a distinguished medical career, the family finally moved to Knill in 1979.

David joined the Herefordshire Botanical Society in 1978, in what might be considered the golden years of the Society, organized and led by Peter and Stephanie Thompson. The Society had been formed by Mrs Margaret Whitehead as a breakaway group from the Woolhope Club which, in its early years, did not encourage lady members. Mrs Whitehead had published a plant list for the county in 1976 and the Society was enthusiastically recording to update this. The Society had well over a hundred members and attracted new younger members, such as Jean Wynne-Jones and Liz Dean. There was also great expertise from the likes of Peter and Joan Hall, who had produced the first county flora for Sussex. Both, but particularly Joan, were regarded with awe when they came on field trips and many were reduced to complete silence in

their company. David flourished in this environment, increasing his own knowledge and taking great pleasure in helping and encouraging beginners. On field trips, when difficult plants were encountered, David would always produce his Clapham, Tutin and Warburg and insist that people work through the key. He always made this fun and accepted that an answer would not necessarily be forthcoming and that hybrids and natural variation had to be allowed for. Botanical Society meetings often seemed to unearth plants showing quite a lot of natural variation.

By the the mid-eighties, computerised botanical recording became commonplace. David embraced this technology with enthusiasm, working on the Herefordshire and Radnorshire plant records as well as assisting with records for Brecknock and County Wexford. All of his records in these years were computerised using Alan Morton's DMAP. Having got to know Alan, who had a holiday home in mid-Wales, David was very pleased to work with him in the development of the programme. Alan used to bring his family to visit David and Helen and, while the children played in the Hindwell Brook that bordered the garden, Alan and David would discuss the latest changes to DMAP.

David's help was crucial in the production of the maps for *Flora of Radnorshire* (Woods 1993), a *Lichen Flora of Brecknock* (Woods 2003) and *The Mosses and Liverworts of Brecknock* (Woods 2006). It is doubtful that any of these publications would have been completed without his help and support. Perhaps his greatest contribution was in the production of *An Atlas of the Vascular Plants of Herefordshire* (2nd edn. 2001). He was involved in the editorial work and by computer produced all the maps. David was not intimidated by the vast numbers of records involved (over 150,000 for the Herefordshire plant atlas alone) and would work steadily and methodically to get through them (typically, an hour or so every morning before breakfast) and was always spurred on by his wish to see and interpret the final maps. He was forever fascinated by the differences between the

distributions of species in Herefordshire and Radnorshire such as the almost complete absence of Traveller's Joy in Radnorshire compared with its ubiquity in Herefordshire.

Following the retirement of Miss Ann Powell, David took over as vice-county recorder for Radnorshire in 1989, the least densely populated vice-county in England and Wales. He was an enthusiastic and diligent recorder until his retirement in 2007 and liked nothing more than to receive a phone call from someone requesting a botanical survey of their land, or with details of a potentially scarce plant. When he was forced to give up as recorder he was delighted to be able to hand over the position to Liz Dean and Sue Spencer with whom he had botanized for many years.

David was an active member of the groups in which he was involved. He was on the committee of the Herefordshire Botanical Society for many years, served on the Welsh BSBI committee and was a trustee of the Radnorshire Wildlife Trust where he helped create a very vibrant Trust with a selection of botanically rich reserves of which Radnorshire is rightly proud. Although his contribution as a committee member was of course worthwhile, his enthusiasm, good nature and steadfastness were of far greater value. Botanical walks anywhere near Knill ended with invitations to tea where Helen always provided wonderful hospitality and committee meetings were regularly hosted, again with never failing hospitality. David enjoyed bringing people together and helped forge many friendships through his contributions to group activities such as the Herefordshire Botanical Society's annual trip to the wilds of Radnorshire and memorably, their week-long trip to Ireland and the Burren.

David's other great love in retirement was music and Knill Court acted as a hub for those in the area interested in music. He and Helen established the Halcyon choir that still meets weekly at Knill and which put on joint concerts with the Asklepios Orchestra that David established whilst on the teaching staff at Birmingham University. The choir regularly performed when David and Helen opened their exceptionally fine garden to raise

funds for the nearby historic Knill Church. They were also instrumental in setting up the Presteigne Festival which, thirty years later, is now a major event in the British musical calendar. In recognition of his contribution to the festival, the David Humphreys Memorial Concert took place in August 2012, featuring appropriately his favourite instruments, the oboe and piano, with the world-renowned oboist Nicholas Daniel. Again, it was David's calm support and encouragement which helped to see projects through in the early days when funding and support was so uncertain.

When arriving at David and Helen's home of Knill Court "to go out botanizing", one was regarded as improperly dressed if not wearing the symbol of the trade - a lens. Perhaps this was a hangover from his medical days when he wore a stethoscope. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than meeting up with fellow botanists looking forward to a day in the field.

David remained very active through his eighties but suffered a debilitating stroke in 2007 which left him frustratingly dependent on others. His mind, to the end was quick and always enquiring. He could recall instantly where a plant had been found, often years after the event, and he looked forward keenly to the

hunt each year for old and new flowers. David's funeral took place on a day of wonderful spring sunshine and he is buried in the churchyard at Knill, amidst the flowers that he loved, a few yards from his home and the beautiful garden that he and Helen created. The doors at Knill were always open to the botanical community - it was ever a happy place to visit and David is sorely missed.

### **Bibliography**

David made a significant contribution to the following volumes:-

- Herefordshire Botanical Society (2nd edn. 2001). *An Atlas of the Vascular Plants of Herefordshire*.
- Port, J. (2001). *An Atlas of Herefordshire Bryophytes* Privately published by the author.
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- Woods, R.G. (2006). *The Mosses and Liverworts of Brecknock* Privately published by the author.

RAY WOODS



David Ridley Humphreys (1916–2011)  
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