

Mary Briggs (1923-2014)

Mary was the face of the BSBI for almost thirty years, much of it in conjunction with our long-serving Treasurer, Mike Walpole. She became Honorary General Secretary in 1972, and served as that before becoming our first, and to date, only, lady President in 1998. That bare statistic does not do justice to her work for the Society, since she was also on the Meetings Committee from 1964 to 2008, as Meetings Secretary from 1964 to 1972, and was thus involved in every AGM, Exhibition Meeting, Records' Conference and the like. As Hon. Gen. Sec. she was also an *ex-officio* member of every other BSBI Committee and such was her dedication to the Society that she attended most of them for over 25 years. She knew everybody in BSBI circles, in England at least, and was hands-on in every sense. I am sure that we all possess correspondence from her crammed onto postcards, with the writing continuing up the side and over the top too. When Gwynn Ellis, Ailsa Burns and then I took over, we could not remotely give the same love and attention to all the facets of the Society that Mary had done, and for me at least, it was only then that I realised just how much she did. For her the social side was so important, and every meeting of the various committees was always ended by a drink and a meal out with as many colleagues as possible; indeed, even after retiring from the committees, she still made the trip into London for the meal afterwards! She also knew almost everyone outside the BSBI with an interest in the British flora, both amateur and professional, and was passionate about putting people with common interests in touch with each other. In this way she did a lot to raise the profile of the BSBI in academic circles.

In 1990 Mary persuaded the Society that a new annual publication, *BSBI Year Book*, was needed, which would provide details of all the Officers and Committee members as well as lists of Vice-county Recorders, Referees, the Field Meetings Programme for the coming

year and an up-to-date List of Members. This she edited until 2003.

Mary was born in India, but was sent home to England to school when she was five. After her father's early death, her mother and sister returned home and they moved to Hove. She trained as a pharmacist, but already, in the war, was cycling across Sussex, keeping a diary of what she saw.

Apart from her own determination, there seem to have been varied influences on Mary from her early twenties. Arthur Chater relates that she told him that she learnt her flowers at Maes-y-resgob near Mold on school holidays with friends (Sumner). She worked for the Field Studies Council at Flatford Mill, and she met Ted Lousley, perhaps one of the three best botanists in Britain at the time, through the Horsham Natural History Society, where he gave a complete series of his lectures. From this she was inspired to go on a botanical meeting in Scotland, where the redoubtable and awe-inspiring Mary McCallum Webster asked her if she "was a 'Woof' or an ordinary botanist". Mary Briggs was baffled by the question (a 'Woof' is a member of the Wild Flower Society). When she asked Mary McC.-W. which society she should join, she said "both, as they are so different"; and that was her introduction to the BSBI. She figured straight away in the WFS too. In the report of the WFS First Hunt 1961 it states "I think the *pièce de résistance* must have been Mrs Briggs in a ploughed field with a hefty three-year-old asleep on her back!". In fact she topped her branch in her first year, and moved to 'Valhalla' after only three years, aided by trips to the Cairngorms, Teesdale, Sligo and the Yorkshire Dales. She contributed to the 'First Hunt' and was in charge of the 'Last Hunt' too. She was active throughout the 1960s but this tailed off after becoming the BSBI's Honorary General Secretary, although she remained a member for almost 50 years.

She met and married her husband, Alan, in 1952 and moved to White Cottage, Slinfold,

where they lived till he died in 1987. But long before that he had encouraged her to become involved in Sussex botany and then the wider stage outlined above. In fact her involvement in Sussex came at a fortunate time, as the Flora project there, under Peter Hall, was just beginning, culminating in the Atlas of 1980.

Mary was the Vice-county Recorder for West Sussex from 1975 to 1997 on her own, and then with colleagues until 2011. She was also the President of the Sussex Flora Society for 30 years, until her death. She produced a supplement to the 1980 *Sussex plant atlas* of the interesting plants in 1990, together with a privately-circulated list of extra tetrad records to supplement the above. More importantly, she edited the Sussex Rare Plant Register in 2001. If this was not the first county to produce such a work it was certainly the first to go into such detail, with an account of each species, and, most importantly, six-figure grid references of almost every plant. That last was a revolution, since for years and years the doom-sayers had restricted such detail on the grounds that it would encourage collection of plants or destruction of their habitat. Indeed, 15 years on I am confident in saying that not only have many other counties followed this lead but that the threatened picking has almost never occurred, and is infinitely more offset by knowledge of their whereabouts saving sites from destruction and by the pleasure gained from seeing plants in their habitat.

To complement this she produced in 2004 a more popular book on rare and interesting Sussex plants: *Sussex wild flowers*, with colour pictures and background details on where to see each, thus continuing the theme of her Rare Plant Register. Arthur Chater adds that "Her talk on the Sussex flora at a Record-ers' Conference at Rogate was outstanding of its kind".

A parallel life was in the world of wild flower trips abroad. In the 1970s she received, as Hon. Gen. Sec., a letter asking if she knew of a suitable botanist to lead a wild flower tour to Switzerland. She, with her husband's encouragement, thought that she might be able to do such a thing herself, and the result was

an era of 32 years in which Mary led 166 trips across 29 countries, mainly for Cox & Kings. In fact, I led my one and only BSBI overseas trip in north-east Turkey in 1997, and Mary came on it, with some of her colleagues from her trips. Without my realising, she took pole position on the coach, and it was the devil's own job to persuade her I was the leader! But that trip made me realise that taking such a trip was no sinecure, and I can only admire her stamina and tact with all those people over so many years, scores of whom became her personal friends.

In the 1970s she was much involved in the BSBI's part in the campaign against the dam in Upper Teesdale, and then in the Wildlife and Countryside Act, leading to an MBE in 1981. Being Hon. Gen. Sec. led to invitations to Buckingham Palace garden parties and to the Castle of Mey to meet the Society's (then) patron, the Queen Mother.

On Alan's death, she moved to Pulborough, and I recall visiting her book-lined room, looking out onto the Downs. Her glaucoma worsened over the years, and by the end she was almost totally blind, but somehow she bore it, with very few complaints – all part of the stamina. Mary was a bit of a luddite and never owned a television or used a computer but in her final stint as the BSBI's Obituaries Editor, Gwynn Ellis recalls that she did resort to getting her upstairs neighbour, who was computer-literate, to send and receive proofs.

As this obituary goes to press I must relate a conversation with Summerfield Books, who are selling Mary's library. Explaining the delay in getting out the catalogue, Chris O'Hara told me that it was so interesting: every book was crammed with annotations, cards and cuttings, so that she was constantly diverted from the job in hand. Somehow this produces an image of Mary that is true to life and better than words.

I must extend thanks to all those who have helped me in compiling this: Frances Abraham, Arthur Chater, Gwynn Ellis, John Swindells and Nick Sturt.

DAVID PEARMAN



Mary Briggs at the opening of the Albury Nowers Nature Reserve, Tring in June 1991
Photo D.J. Hambler © 1991



Mary Briggs botanising in Slovenia, camera and umbrella at the ready (photo taken by the late Betty Goddard, supplied by Mary's daughter, Jenny Grech)



Mary Briggs in Wengen, Switzerland, photo taken by Dr Arthur Hollman and reproduced with his permission