

## RODERICK CARTER STERN (1928–2019)

With the publication of the *Sussex Plant Atlas* in 1980 the purpose of the Sussex Flora Society (SFS) had been fulfilled, and there were many members who assumed that disbandment of that body would logically follow. Others thought differently, among them Rod Stern. He had met the leading light of the society, Mary Briggs, at a BSBI conference, The British Oak, at the University of Sussex and they were both firmly of the opinion that there was more recording work to do and more enjoyment to be had. A Steering Committee was formed with others keen to continue the co-ordinated botanical activity in the county and the SFS was reincarnated as the Sussex Botanical Recording Society (SBRS). With Mary appointed President and Rod re-elected annually to the Chair from 1985, until stepping down in 2012, the SBRS flourished under their inspiring direction and went on to become recognised as the lead botanical body in the county. During this time the SBRS produced two major publications, *Sussex Plant Atlas: Selected Supplement* (1990) and *The Sussex Rare Plant Register of Scarce and Threatened Vascular plants, Charophytes, Bryophytes and Lichens* (2001); and it was under the auspices of Rod and Mary that concerted work began in 2004 on the *Flora of Sussex* (2018).

Roderick Carter Stern was born to Cyril Edmund and Vera Frances Stern on 21st March 1928 in Farnborough, Kent. Cyril was a company director with sufficient income to maintain a large house in leafy Wimbledon and Rod was educated privately, at Rokeby and Ashdown House, King's College School, Wimbledon (KCS) and Radley College, before securing admission to Oxford. His mother encouraged her son to take an interest in natural history on walks across Wimbledon Common and during stays on the Isle of Wight – where their two maids and the silver canteen of cutlery provided some of the necessary Stern household comforts. A holiday in 1938 brought the enchantment of Braunton Burrows, and a war-time break from the bombing snatched in Killin, Perth, in 1943 presented the young Rod with two memorable plants, *Parnassia palustris* (Grass-of-Parnassus) and *Saxifraga aizoides* (Yellow Saxifrage). The KCS biology master 'Bolly' Barker had provided additional encouragement to

study biology and, moving on to Radley, Rod found that the sciences were indeed his forte; and in his last years he fondly recalled exeats spent exploring the flora of the countryside around Radley by bicycle in the company of like-minded friends. Going up to Worcester College, he read Forestry (1946–50) and his career path was settled.

There were two years of National Service to be undertaken and during his posting to the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Rod took the opportunity to add exotic specimens to his herbarium and birds to the lifetime list he had begun at the age of 14. At the end of his Service, Rod settled into work with the Forestry Commission in Wales, moving to the London headquarters in 1968. Key papers on *Acer pseudoplatanus* (Sycamore) – a species generally unsung in the literature of British Forestry – seem to have been responsible, at least in part, for his election to Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Foresters in 1982. It is fair to comment that, although Rod was entirely successful in his various administrative roles, his natural habitat was woodland and towards the end of his career he was able to combine his professional interest in the growing of timber trees with his private love of the natural world as Conservation Advisor for East England.

When he was transferred to London, Rod soon joined both the London Natural History Society and the Surrey Flora Committee. In some shock after the collapse of his marriage and with two young sons to bring up, he was taken in hand by Joyce Smith, Jack Gardiner and Ted Wallace who felt that bryophytes would provide a distraction and source of solace. Thus Rod began to form the important bryophyte herbarium which is now in the care of the Natural History Museum, London. Among a number of his publications in bryology were *Atlas of Sussex Mosses, Liverworts and Lichens* (1991), 'A bryophyte Flora of South Wiltshire' in *Journal of Bryology* (2001) and *An Atlas of South Hampshire Bryophytes* (2010: his last work). The Sussex work was produced by Rod in conjunction with Francis Rose, Brian Coppins and Howard Matcham. In Howard Matcham we have a prime example of Rod's willingness to foster and teach others: a particularly apt pupil, he has since gone on to



Rod Stern (centre) at a *Hieracium* meeting on Portland in the mid 1980s, with Jim Bevan (left) and Howard Matcham (right).

become a bryologist and microscopist of international standing. Rod was a member of the British Bryological Society until his death and had served as Conservation Officer for 12 years and Member of Council for 14 years.

Rod was in fact very much an old-fashioned all-round naturalist and had a superb ear for birdsong. Equally, his eminence in bryology should not lead one to overlook his detailed knowledge of the vascular flora of the British Isles, and in a lifetime of botany he had seen a very large percentage of it. In his botanical studies he was always ready for a challenge, something which is well illustrated by the special interest which he took in hawkweeds. His work on *Hieracium* and his herbarium specimens have proved invaluable to Mike Shaw who is currently preparing a study of the genus in south-east England.

We have seen that Rod was generous with his input into the running of both the SBRS and the BBS. He had a genuine sense of service as well as quiet but dynamic enthusiasm. The Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation, now the Sussex Wildlife Trust, also benefited from his time: he was elected to the Council, served on the Scientific Committee and then the Conservation Committee. His guidance in the early stages of the setting up of the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre is still valued and protocols and systems which he helped develop are still in use today.

There was also Plantlife. Having been a member of the Conservation Association of Botanical Societies – as Chairman in 1989–90 – he was an enthusiastic Founder Member of Plantlife and was elected to the Board from 1992 until 1995. In 1999 he was presented with a Plantlife Award for ‘Outstanding Contribution

to Plant Conservation' by the President, David Bellamy. Latterly, a photograph of the occasion hung on the wall of Rod's room in his nursing home in Fishbourne where he spent his last five or so years. Here he kept up to date with the worlds of forestry, bryophytes and vascular plants through the relevant journals, and enjoyed hearing first-hand about the activities of the societies dear to his heart, as well as reminiscing about field trips, meetings and figures of the past. Among a number of botanical visitors Howard Matcham was the most regular, along with several friends from school days. Rod died peacefully on 4th January 2019.

Rod's contribution to botany and conservation has been considerable. His driving interest in these areas was innate but it was his second marriage, to Vanessa, in 1979, which arguably enabled him to achieve so much, for Vanessa's efficiency as willing in-house PA was a great advantage to Rod and to the bodies which he served. Together they enjoyed botanising at home and abroad, as far afield as Australia and the USA. Rod was by nature thoughtful and there were often long silences;

rather than give a quick off-the-cuff answer, typically he would prefer to weigh up pros and cons, to consider at length. One could also observe that Rod enjoyed company without feeling any urgency about initiating conversation – something which can be a positive recommendation in a companion in the field. On the other hand, he asserted his presence altogether more forcefully on the field of sport: he enjoyed rugby and cricket at school, gained cups for athletics as a young man, sailed, was a more than competent golfer (best handicap 10), played squash and competed fiercely on the tennis court well into his retirement. But perhaps it was in swimming more than in any other physical activity that Rod took delight, and whenever a field meeting was within striking distance of the sea or fresh water his regular companions became accustomed to noticing over the lunch break Rod quietly rejoining the group with hair tousled and damp, and a beatific smile on his face.

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