

GEOFFREY THOMAS DUERDEN WILMORE (1941–2018)

Geoffrey Wilmore died on 3rd November 2018. He was a husband, father, botanist, ecologist, cricket lover and Yorkshireman.

Geoffrey was BSBI Vice-County Recorder for South-west Yorkshire (v.c.63) between 1993 and 2015 and in that time he published two County Floras. He will be remembered for his enthusiasm and his love of the company of people wanting to learn more about plants. Geoffrey's professional life and his role as Vice-County Recorder both involved training new generations of field ecologists and botanists. He always encouraged and valued the recording work of volunteers in providing the data required to ensure that some of the best botanical sites in South-west Yorkshire are now afforded protection. The highlight of his career was, for him, election to Fellowship of the Linnean Society in 1996.

Geoffrey's route into the ecological profession was not straightforward. He was born on 2nd January 1941 in the old Keighley Victoria Hospital and lived all his life in the Keighley area, apart from a brief period in Bradford in the 1980s. His interest in natural history was sparked by the gift of two books as birthday presents at the age of ten. One was T.A. Coward's pocket-sized *Birds of the British Isles* and the other was *Wandering with Nomad* by the naturalist and BBC Home Service radio broadcaster Norman Ellison, alongside whom Geoffrey's father had fought at Ypres Salient in the First World War. Geoffrey's first interest was in birds. He would take birdwatching walks along the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, the River Aire, and into the local woodlands, but he did not join any local society. His interest in wildlife continued intermittently throughout his school years. He enjoyed studying literature at school and developed a love of poetry which stayed with him throughout his life, and which he passed on to his own children and grandchildren.

At the age of 14 Geoffrey left Bradford Grammar School to work in the family business 'Wimsol', manufacturing bleaches and detergents and later, after the business was bought by Jeyes Group in the 1960s, as a junior executive in Jeyes. During this time, extended periods at night school and on day release gaining business qualifications (studying for an Ordinary National Certificate in Business Studies from 1963

to 1965) left little time for him to develop his natural history interests. Geoffrey stayed with Jeyes for four years until he realised (in his own words) that he was 'a square peg in a round hole', and unsuited to big business. So he left Jeyes to become a mature student reading Geography at Leeds University in 1970. He had a young family to support at this time and this was a challenging decision, but one that he did not regret.

He recalled his interview with the Admissions Tutor who asked why he wanted to study Geography. Despite having only studied the subject for one year as an eleven year old, his answer was 'Because I like maps!' The Admissions Tutor was apparently not impressed by this answer (or his lack of even an O level or A level in Geography) but he was able to demonstrate his academic credentials with his Certificate in Business Management. He was probably the only freshman in that year at Leeds to be studying Geography virtually from scratch, with no prior exam qualifications, and he was easily the oldest member of the 70-strong intake. His interest was particularly fired by a course entitled 'Vegetation and Soils' – under Dr Robert Eyre – and this was a powerful stimulus in his decision to try and eventually work in the field of ecology.

Having developed a good rapport with staff at Cliffe Castle Museum in Keighley whilst researching his final year thesis 'The urban development and growth of Keighley since the Enclosure Award in 1780', Geoffrey left University in July 1973 to work at the Museum on a voluntary basis whilst looking for permanent employment. This work involved learning how to put on displays effectively, writing captions and labels, and cataloguing all the books and other literature in the Cliffe Castle library. Eventually, Geoffrey became a 'lowly member of staff' as a temporary Museum Assistant.

Local Government reorganisation in the Spring of 1974 created the new Bradford Metropolitan District. A Biological Recording and Environmental facility and Database covering this area, based at Cliffe Castle Museum, came into being on 1st April that year. This facility became known as the Biological Data Bank, one of the very first such units in local government in England. Geoffrey became the unofficial Assistant Ecologist to Jack Lavin, the unit's first Field Officer,



Geoffrey Wilmore at home. On the table there is an OS 1: 50 000 map, with the monads in South Yorkshire from which more than 100 species have been recorded highlighted in pink.

carrying out the first surveys. He had been in the right place, fortuitously, at the right time. The first major task was a habitat survey of all land parcels in Bradford Metropolitan District, applying the broad Phase 1 Survey technique using English Nature's colour coded system on 1: 10 560 Ordnance Survey maps. Geoffrey recalled that 'we went through phenomenal amounts of coloured pencils'. Surveying on a broad-brush scale was far more efficiently carried out from suitable vantage points, thus high points of the moors were excellent in viewing the surrounding landscape. The views were 'Fantastic. You could see half the world from up there – or more correctly, almost all of a 6 inch map!'

Very soon after the Biological Data Bank came into being, a state-of-the-art computer was delivered, 'occupying around 18 feet of the 20 foot length of the office wall, and jutting out probably three or four feet into the room. This was truly a behemoth of 1970s technology! We all stared aghast at the sheer size and apparent complexity of the contraption.'

The role of the Unit expanded to cover all five districts of West Yorkshire and it became quickly

apparent that reinforcements would be required to assist with future Phase 1 Surveys. Geoffrey's role evolved to being virtually wholly involved with fieldwork and ecological evaluation and it fell to him to take the young ecological appointees out and train them in the basic aspects of plant survey and ecological principles, and, importantly, to ensure so far as possible that they all followed and adhered to a prescribed and standardised survey technique – that, as Geoffrey often said, we were all singing from the same hymn sheet. His teaching was no less effective for the stammer which affected him throughout his life. He recalled taking one particular trainee out on Haworth Moor in November 1990, an unlikely and unpropitious time of year for field work. This was 'to show him the most relentless and unforgiving habitat assemblages possible – to really indoctrinate him into the exigencies of extreme ecological survey. We tramped through mire and bog, heathland and tussocky *Molinia* sward (and it rained cats-and-dogs into the bargain), but none of this fazed him in the least.' That trainee took over as Head of the Unit until the Service was closed down later in the 1990s.

Many areas identified in the Phase 1 Survey work as being of good quality and requiring more detailed survey and evaluation eventually became Local Wildlife Sites and several were subsequently recommended by the Unit to English Nature as potential SSSIs, which, in due course, they became.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Biological Data Bank (later known as The West Yorkshire Ecological Advisory Service) formed valuable associations with many actively recording botanists who were instrumental in adding to the database. In the mid-1980s, when the plant database had swelled to a considerable extent, Jack Lavin and Geoffrey took the decision to produce a Flora or Plant Atlas of West Yorkshire. *The West Yorkshire Plant Atlas* was produced eventually by Bradford Council in 1994. This contained references to over 1,400 species, with numerous distribution maps at the 1km square level.

Dr John Rodwell of Lancaster University visited Keighley on several occasions to discuss the input of suitably structured vegetational data into the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) system. Over several years, Geoffrey and his team made important contributions in respect of woodland, grassland

and wetland communities, in particular. Geoffrey devised and led numerous training courses in plant identification and NVC survey techniques.

Geoffrey remained for over 20 years at Cliffe Castle. Undertaking field survey can sometimes present the surveyor with difficult, challenging, frightening or simply humorous situations and encounters. In Geoffrey's memoirs, *Flowers of Spring to Leaves of Autumn*, published serially in the Annual review of the Bradford Botany Group, a couple of incidents stand out: 'happily walking along the towpath and writing species information on the clipboard, when, not looking, stepping into thin air and descending feet first into the muddy waters of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal', or, on the towpath of the same canal, diving to the ground as a huge swarm of bees passed noisily overhead.

In 1994, soon after Geoffrey became BSBI Recorder for v.c.63, he took over as Yorkshire Naturalists' Union (YNU) Alien Plant Recorder. He had developed a personal interest in the 'shoddy weeds' common at one time in a particular district of West Yorkshire. Shoddy (a mixture of shredded wool waste) from all over Europe, or further afield, was spread onto vegetable crop fields as a fertiliser. Strange and exotic plants were brought in as seed with the imported waste.

Following voluntary redundancy caused by staff cutbacks in Local Government in 1995, Geoffrey began a new phase of his career working as a freelance ecological consultant. He also sat on several local government Local Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Steering Groups. Geoffrey was President of the YNU, 2009–2010 (Wilmore 2010) and gave his Presidential Address on the Alien Plants – An Ecological Perspective on 20th November 2010 at Bingley (Wilmore 2011).

Consultancy work included Local Wildlife Site Surveys for local councils and surveys for various government agencies, including English Nature (now Natural England). Jeff Lunn was Regional Manager for the Yorkshire and Humber Region of English Nature; he and John Rodwell collaborated with Geoffrey in the production of *The South Yorkshire Plant Atlas*, published in 2011. This was launched at a gathering in Doncaster Museum, with a huge attendance of local naturalists. The initial stages of this County Flora project had not run smoothly and Geoffrey personally re-launched it with the editorial contributors, assembled a reliable

group of field recorders and arranged regular field meetings to target under-recorded areas. The resulting *Atlas* was widely praised in botanical circles. The sustained organisation, dedication and drive required to produce two County Floras in the space of 17 years is testimony to Geoffrey's perseverance and leadership skills.

In 2002, Geoffrey began to produce annual lists of additions to the British and Irish flora, incorporating many casual aliens which were not covered by Clement & Foster's *Alien plants of the British Isles* (1994). The last of these lists, the 17th list, was completed in January 2018. He also produced periodical master lists, and in his last years he devised a plan to produce an updated checklist of our flora. Despite the diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis in May 2018 and the need for supplementary oxygen, he kept busy with his alphabetical checklist. He knew that it was a mammoth undertaking but it was something he thought was worthwhile – and it was a task he could do without much physical effort. The work was still underway at the time of his death. It is his family's wish that someone will take over Geoffrey's work and bring it to fruition.

Geoffrey had been the Chairman of Bradford Botany Group and was Recorder for the Group for 30 years, retiring in 2017. He first joined the Group in 1987, shortly after he had given a talk about his work including his Plant Atlas Project for West Yorkshire. Members of the group who knew Geoffrey for many years describe him as kind and helpful (especially to complete beginners), sensitive, understanding and respectful, but with ability to be (legitimately) furious when circumstances required a stern response. He was a very good teacher, always supportive and a good source of sound advice. His energy and enthusiasm for the subject have been described as both stimulating and infectious. His organisational skills and attention to detail were some of his admired qualities, together with his reliability; if he said he would do something, he did it, and in double quick time. Even in the field, his handwriting was immaculate. Geoffrey has also been described as stubborn! When weeks of work on his Plant Checklist were lost owing to a computer glitch he just knuckled down to rebuild it from scratch. This didn't happen just once; he lost his database through computer glitches on three occasions and his response was always the same. He was a man with ambition,

but not for himself (he was somewhat self-effacing), but for his interest, his love and his main passion – botany! One of his other passions was cricket. Lunchtimes on field meetings were often spent with Geoffrey deep in conversation with fellow cricket-loving botanists about the latest England cricket team debacle.

Geoffrey was a ‘larger than life’ character, both in physical and mental stature (he was over 6ft 4in tall). Many who knew Geoffrey comment on his sense of humour and also on his love of ‘stirring things up’. He is reported to have said many times that he had worked hard at being an eccentric. He had a sweatshirt with the words ‘This is a difficult group’, the words he often used when on field trips when someone asked him to identify a particular species. He said, jokingly, that it could refer to Bradford Botany Group also! One of Geoffrey’s favourite anecdotes was of once being asked to say grace in a monastery. He found himself as the guest at the top table in a room full of monks. Imagining that everything here was conducted in Latin and the only Latin he claimed he knew was plant names; he stood up, reeled off a few Latin plant names, and ending with amen, he sat down, at which point

everyone started eating.

It is difficult to imagine a future without Geoffrey’s huge presence somewhere in the background. He will be regarded by future generations of naturalists as a giant of Yorkshire botany.

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