

## JOHN ROBIN PALMER (1931–2019)

John Palmer was a most enthusiastic hunter of alien plants, resulting in about 60 publications in *BSBI News*. John was born on 29 May 1931 in Derby, the son of a schoolmaster. He was educated at Bemrose School and the London School of Economics. After graduating, he was called up to do his National Service in the Royal Army Educational Corps, where the lowest rank is Sergeant, thereby making the Corps a much sought-after placement, granted to few. During his LSE vacations he had met Pauline, and they became engaged on his demobilisation in 1954. For a year and a half John worked at a bank in Loughborough, then in 1956 a lot happened: he and Pauline got married, he landed a job with the Prudential Assurance Company, his employer for the rest of his working life, and they moved to Bromley, with easy rail travel to Holborn Viaduct station a mere five minutes' walk from the company's head office in High Holborn. They later moved out to a new house in South Darenth in Kent outside the recently extended boundary of London, still with ready access to the same railway line, but now with good access to proper countryside.

In childhood John had enjoyed what is now the Peak District National Park with his parents, and this was continued on marriage with Pauline – they even spent their honeymoon there. Acquisition of *Collins Pocket Guide to Wild Flowers* and their consequent joining of the Wild Flower Society prompted a new enthusiasm, and soon after John also joined the

London Natural History Society and Kent Field Club. Through the LNHS he met Eric Clement, and through the KFC Eric Philp; he was to remain friends with both for the rest of his active life. In the WFS the regional branch secretaries, more numerous then than now, all had their addresses printed in its magazine, and it seems that he corresponded with many of them about locations of rarer plants which could be visited. His rapid rise through the lower ranks of the WFS had meant that by now he needed the opportunities to add aliens to his cumulative totals, and for a few years these opportunities were provided by visits to refuse tips, of which there were very many between South Darenth and the Thames, and by LNHS visits to Blackmoor Fruit Farm in Hampshire, led by J.E. Lousley, then chairman of the LNHS Botany Section, whose main interest in that period was in wool aliens. In the late 1960s there were at least two years in which John stood up after the annual formal business of the WFS to announce an unprogrammed meeting the next day to visit tips in cars. The first formally programmed meeting he led was for the KFC in May 1969 which visited seven sites in v.c. 16, with many aliens recorded. There were several others in later years, for the LNHS, WFS, KFC and BSBI in various combinations.

The LNHS gave John his first opportunity to get records published; Lousley's report on 'Botanical records for 1963' mentions 'a useful list of aliens including *Artemisia biennis* from a garden in Queen

Anne Avenue, Bromley [the street where he lived] ... and *Hibiscus trionum* from Hayes Common'. He continued to send lists of records (not all of aliens) for the rest of his botanising life to the LNHS botany recorder: first Lousley and then the writer. For many years they were in the form of photocopies of densely written A4 pages. Other copies went to Eric Philp as BSBI recorder for Kent, Eric Clement for 'Adventive News' in *BSBI News*, and his WFS branch secretary, for whose benefit there was a column at the left hand margin with a running total of the year's additions to his cumulative WFS list. (There were up to 14 pages in any one year, and picking out the relevant records and copying them into the appropriate places was a mammoth task.) John had joined the BSBI in 1965, gaining access to referees and vice-county recorders, but the supply of information soon started going the other way once he had ceased seeking out native rarities from distant parts. Cornwall was a favourite destination for family beach holidays, and his records from there, now on the BSBI database, go back to before he joined. Among later Cornish records are the first British records of *Eccremocarpus scaber*, *Pittosporum ralphii* and *Olearia solandri* and the only British records of *Elaeagnus* × *reflexa* Morren & Decne 'scandent and rooting in a hedge near Durgan SW72T' and *Veronica* × *kirkii* J.B. Armstrong 'on side of stone wall, not near houses, Phillack SW53U'.

In the 1970s John and others were increasingly finding plants of soya bean *Glycine max* on tips and other sites in north-west Kent, with an assemblage of species indicating a probable North American origin. John located the source of these, an oil milling plant at Erith, and was able to get the manager of the company interested in it. John's account of his researches, including a list of 57 taxa, 'Oil-milling adventive plants in north-west Kent, 1973–76' (*Transactions of the Kent Field Club* 6: 85–90, 1977), is the longest of his publications. In 1978 his discovery of *Cerastium brachypetalum* in Kent, its only other known British site being on the Beds/Northants border, was probably his best record. He later found it in other sites near the first one, and he argued fairly convincingly for its native status in Kent.

It was not until 1980 that the first of John's *BSBI News* notes appeared. Most of them were very brief, but the value of several was greatly enhanced by drawings by Hilli Thompson. Those BSBI members who came to the Exhibition Meetings in 1981–84 got a much better impression of the intensity of his activity. In the last of these exhibitions, he showed specimens of 35 taxa, one of which was the native *Pyrola rotundifolia*; he claimed to have found an inland site for ssp. *maritima*, but a later study at the same site shows that the distinction between the subspecies breaks down there. Many other specimens exhibited were of *Cotoneaster* species. From about 1976 he spent much more time investigating a wider range of habitats than rubbish tips, and shrubs becoming naturalised from old plantings or bird sowings received a lot of attention. Particularly rewarding sites were the surrounds of two buildings destroyed in the Second World War, an isolation hospital deep in Darenth Wood and a mansion at Hextable. John was BSBI referee for *Cotoneaster* 1985–96, and in 1988 he produced 'A check-list for *Cotoneasters* naturalised in the British Isles' in *BSBI News* 50: 32–33, a list of 44 names, all of plants which he had seen himself, though many, marked with an asterisk, had only shown their potential to become naturalised. An example of these was *C. nitens*, dealt with in *BSBI News* 65: 40–41 (1994), where the material supplied to Mrs Thompson was small plants dug up near Hyde Park Corner and grown on to maturity.

His last observation of a growing plant in *BSBI News* was in 1997, but he continued to send records to the *Bulletin of the Kent Field Club*, LNHS and WFS for another nine years. He had never used a computer, and at the end was finding that he could no longer remember what he had already recorded. His family donated his specimens to the Natural History Museum in 2015. John died on 6 February 2019. Surviving him are Pauline, their children Mark and Angela, and three grandchildren.

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Rodney Burton