

OBITUARIES

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PETER MICHAEL BENOIT (1931–2021)

Peter Benoit was one of the most knowledgeable and critical of the Welsh field botanists of his time, and certainly one of the most informative to be with in the field. His expertise was especially with hybrids and confusing groups of species, rather than with the apomictic genera (although he knew his Hawkweeds well), and as Recorder for Merioneth (v.c. 48) for 56 years he had an unrivalled knowledge of the plants of the county.

Peter was born on 8 March 1931. Although his family originated in Surrey, he was brought up in Meriden, Solihull and his enthusiasm for plants was fostered by local walks there with his mother, herself a competent botanist, as were his maternal grandparents. Shortly after World War II broke out, at the age of 9 in 1940, he went with his mother to live with an aunt in Barmouth, leaving his by now estranged father behind, and after a while they moved to live on their own at Pencarreg, at the top of a steep road above the town; they were joined there later by his widowed grandmother. His interest in plants rapidly increased there, and he was largely self-taught with the help of Johns' *Flowers of the Field*, Bentham & Hooker's *Handbook of the British Flora*, Butcher & Strudwick's *Further Illustrations of British Plants* and others. He was initially placed in primary school, but because of his nervous disposition his mother allowed him to leave and he was largely educated at home. He did receive some more formal lessons however, including Latin, from a tutor in Barmouth. He acquired Clapham, Tutin & Warburg's *Flora of the British Isles* on its publication in 1952, and got to know the other local botanists, as well as several further afield, including Dick Roberts, Price Evans, Bill Condry, Arthur Chater (I first met him in 1956) and Mary Richards. He first

met the latter early in 1953, when she collected him at Dolgellau station and was astonished that Peter, with his botanical reputation, was so young; he had his first field outing with her that summer. Their explorations of Merioneth resulted in their joint publication of *A Contribution to a Flora of Merioneth* in *Nature in Wales* in 1961, a second revised edition being separately published in 1964. Alas, it remained



Peter Benoit, photographed in 2005. Arthur Chater

a contribution, though a very informative one, and no proper Flora of the county has since been written (and the only earlier one, by Daniel Angell Jones, remains in manuscript). Peter belonged to the surprisingly large cohort of distinguished field botanists who did not drive, saying he had been too nervous to learn, and he was thus dependent on public transport and friends for most of his botanising. The latter were the more significant in the earlier days, as he was clearly very short of funds. Until he did a number of contract surveys for the Nature Conservancy and then the Countryside Council for Wales he seems to have had no paid employment; he did though get a job with the County Council in Dolgellau, but after the first day, which he did not enjoy, he never went back. Edgar Milne-Redhead arranged for him to be offered the chance of a job in the Kew Herbarium, but Peter declined the offer as he was too attached to his way of life at Barmouth. After Mary Richards moved to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Peter's explorations of Merioneth continued with other motorised botanists, especially with Kathleen Stevens of Tywyn, and extending up to his successor as County Recorder, Sarah Stille. For health reasons, in contrast to most others who botanised in the county, he tended to concentrate on lowland rather than the already better-botanised upland sites. For several decades he regularly tutored on field courses at the Field Studies Council's and other centres in North Wales, chiefly Drapers at Rhyd-y-creuau and Plas Tan-y-bwlch. Under pressure he gave a very few formal talks at meetings.

Although a rather shy person, he was a great communicator of his remarkable botanical knowledge to others, and the field meetings he led were very popular. In the field his combination of mild eccentricity and the eagerness with which he imparted his knowledge endeared him to his companions. In pursuit of a rarity he could forget his limitations and cause alarm by disappearing down a gully or clamber up a cliff. If a farmer loomed on the horizon, he would hurry off in the other direction. For many years after the rest of us started using plastic bags to collect our specimens in,

he used brown paper bags provided by his mother from the chemist's shop where she worked. In later years he usually carried two carrier bags, in one of which he would repeatedly rummage for his frameless lens wrapped up in tissue. The contracts he did for the Nature Conservancy Council and the Countryside Council for Wales included notably their Rare Plants Project in the 1970s, and he also did a variety of site surveys for them as well as for the Wildlife Trusts. He went on several occasions to stay with the Bedfordshire botanists John and Christina Dony for a week, and it was presumably through such friends and other botanical contacts throughout the country who gave him books and papers that he obtained much of his remarkably up-to-date knowledge of taxonomy, as he would have been unable to access most of the necessary literature in Barmouth. From 1958 he co-edited *Nature in Wales*, and contributed the regular field notes on plants and other articles, but resigned in 1967 after disagreements with his difficult co-editor Ronald Lockley. He became an expert bryologist, doing contracts for CCW, including a detailed report on Coed Crafnant in collaboration with Jackie Maynard. In 1978 he also became interested in, and quite expert on, lichens after Doris Pugh showed him Francis Rose's *Observer's Book of Lichens*, and in 1989 he published a list of interesting Montgomeryshire ones that he had recorded.

Peter joined the BSBI in 1953, although his membership lapsed a couple of times for financial reasons, and became Recorder for Merioneth only a year later in 1954; his service of 56 years is currently the longest on record for any Vice-county Recorder. (After a lifetime's generous work in the botanical community, and of contributing his plant records to the BSBI and the Wildlife Trusts he became very possessive and secretive of records of the rarer species made by him and others, and resigned his recordership in 2010 after refusing to give more than hectad references and disapproving of a Rare Plant Register, saying that he deeply resented 'his' records being computerised and made public, and of them being used by others. An unfortunate experience involving the unexplained

disappearance of a *Trichomanes* colony that he once showed to people may have contributed to this.) He also became very involved with the neighbouring county Montgomeryshire, being a member of their Field Society from 1975 until 2001 and leading over a dozen field meetings for them (mostly in Merioneth!) from as early as 1959. He worked closely with Janet McNair, and later with Doris Pugh and then Marjorie Wainwright and others both in the field and by post. He would go to stay at times with both of the latter two, who would meet him from the train and spend long days in the field and long evenings studying their specimens with him. Ian Trueman remembers that Marjorie would send scouts out ahead of their field meetings to locate trees with good mosses and lichens on their trunks, so that they could keep Peter away from them as he could spend hours examining the trunk of a good tree. Alan Morton remembers his helpfulness in the field when working on this Flora with identification tips especially for rushes and sedges, and his total lack of enthusiasm for Alan's offer to use DMAP for an Atlas Flora of Merioneth. When the *Flora of Montgomeryshire* (1995) was being prepared, Peter became a mainstay of the project, but on publication he declined to be listed as a co-author as he thought that more work should have been done.

Peter was the conscientious and helpful BSBI referee for a number of genera, including *Cerastium*, *Stellaria*, *Erodium*, *Ulex*, *Circaea*, *Veronica hederifolia* agg., *Galeopsis tetrahit* agg. and *Juncus bulbosus* agg. His clarification of a number of taxonomic problems were the result of his experiments in hybridisation, notably on *Cardamine flexuosa* × *hirsuta*, *Erodium cicutarium* × *lebelii*, *Circaea alpina* × *lutetiana* and *Galeopsis bifida* × *tetrahit*. His investigations into *Myosotis*, *Ulex*, *Catapodium* and *Festuca* × *Vulpia* hybrids, and on the differentiations of *Juncus kochii*, *J. foliosus* and *Veronica hederifolia* subsp. *lucorum*, were especially helpful and influential. A typical comment on his helpfulness is the following from Ian Bonner: 'When I was working for NC/NCC in north-east Wales in the early 1970s Peter was very patient and helpful in determining/confirming plants I collected in Denbighshire and always wrote extensive and

detailed letters explaining his conclusions, often illustrated with helpful sketches. At that time I was surveying parts of the Denbigh Moors in conjunction with the proposed Brenig reservoir and sent him an unusual sedge from flushes at Gors Maen Llwyd which he determined as the hybrid between *Carex echinata* and *C. dioica* (*C.* × *gaudiniana*) new to Wales. This resulted in our only meeting in the field when I met the Crosville bus from Barmouth for a joint visit to see the plant, which is still present.'

Peter made a large number of first records for Merioneth and other neighbouring counties. Natives for Merioneth included *Hypericum undulatum* at Arthog and *Spergularia rupicola* at Harlech in 1952, *Salicornia perennis* at Barmouth (1954), *Rhynchospora fusca* at Arthog (1963), *Myriophyllum spicatum* at Morfa Harlech (1970), *Carex demissa* × *laevigata* at Llanbedr (1970), *Juncus foliosus* near Barmouth (1972), *Carex limosa* at Trawsfynydd (1978), *Vulpia ciliata* subsp. *ambigua* and *Koeleria macrantha* at Aberdyfi, *Puccinellia distans* at Arthog and *Carex disticha* at Llanaber (all 1991). Natives for Montgomeryshire included *Carex strigosa* at Abermule (1977), *Dryopteris aemula* at Aberllefenni (1978) and *Asplenium obovatum* at Machynlleth (1979), and for Flintshire *Carex strigosa* in Whitford Wood (1967). In addition he made many other first records of hybrids, subspecies and aliens. A large number of his specimens are in the National Museum of Wales herbarium at Cardiff, with others at Kew and elsewhere. His reports, manuscript notes and site surveys for NCC and CCW are scanned and in the Natural Resources Wales archives, and it is hoped that as much of his extensive and informative botanical correspondence that has been preserved and others of his papers will be deposited in the National Library of Wales.

Peter's mother died in 2000, and thereafter increasing health problems began to restrict his botanising. One of his final projects was to record each coastal 1 km square in the county, and he continued to visit other sites reachable by bus or train or with friends by car. In 2015 he went into a care home in Barmouth where he was well looked after until his death on 20 January 2021 at the age of 89. I am grateful to Sarah Stille, Ruth Dawes,

Penny Condry, Jackie Maynard, Sue Southam, Ian Bonner, Ian Trueman, Alan Morton and others for memories and information.

Selected publications

All papers are by P.M. Benoit unless stated.

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Arthur Chater