

## ANITA JO DUNN MBE (1920–2020)

Jo, as she was always known, was a very skilled amateur field botanist. Her knowledge of wild flowers made her the equal to any professional. She was meticulous in her recording. All uncertainties were checked by an authority. Not only did she have an eye for detail, but she also embraced the wider countryside and, in her later years, enjoyed watching garden birds, making notes about their behaviour. She was a charming, modest lady whose enthusiasm for nature was infectious and she will be remembered as a loyal, generous and affectionate friend.

Jo was born on 11 May 1920 in Clifton, Bristol to George and Rose Dunn who a few years before had been resident for a number of years in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She was one of three children;

besides Jo there was a brother Horatio James Rennie (born 1917) and a younger sister, Dora Grace (born 1922). It was at the local primary school that Jo first developed her interest in natural history. While at Kingswood Grammar School (now King's Oak Academy) in Bristol she was so taken by the writings of Henry Williamson that she wrote to him. A brief correspondence led to her being invited to tea!

After leaving school Jo took a secretarial course in Bristol and subsequently worked for a local solicitor's firm. Following the outbreak of war, she joined the Women's Land Army and was assigned to work with the Timber Corps in the Lake District. She remained there for much of the war, moving to Sussex in late 1944 where she continued this work



Jo Dunn at 'her' *Stachys germanica* (Downy Woundwort) site, 22 July 1985. Rosemary FitzGerald

until mid-1945. Immediately after the war Jo returned to Bristol to work as the personal assistant to Professor W.F. Whittard, head of the Department of Geology at the University. She moved to Juniper Hall Field Study Centre, where she worked with its first warden, Geoffrey Hutchings, then in the mid-1950s to Minterne House, Dorset as personal assistant to Edward Kenelm Digby, 11th Baron Digby and Lord Lieutenant of Dorset. Subsequently she held similar jobs at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, Wolfson College, Oxford, Pye's Charitable Settlement, Hawkwood College near Stroud and as P.A. to Sir Alister Hardy, the marine biologist.

In the 1960s Jo became very ill, the cause of which was found to be DDT poisoning. She convalesced for several months in Majorca where she studied the flora. Later she made visits to the Scillies, the Pyrenees, Norway, Switzerland and many other places with friends, making a photographic record of the wild flowers found on each trip. Later her skill as a photographer was recognised when some of her photographs were used in publications, including one of *Stachys germanica* (Downy Woundwort) in Peter Marren's book *Britain's Rare Flowers* (1999).

On retirement Jo settled in Charlbury, west Oxfordshire, where she explored the countryside, undeterred by a knee injury caused by a horse kick. She soon familiarised herself with the local flora and was an active member

of the Wild Flower Society. She contributed a stream of records to *The Flora of Oxfordshire* from its inception in 1967 until publication in 1998.

On one of her local walks in 1984 Jo came across a colony of *Stachys germanica* in a green lane. This thrilling discovery of a very threatened species led to her friendship with Lady Rosemary FitzGerald, whose relatives had rights over the land, and the start of two fruitful botanical projects. The first involved *S. germanica* itself. She visited it regularly to check on the plants, protected them from rabbits with wire cages, organised management of the site and sent annual reports to NCC/English Nature from 1984 to 2004. The stretch of green lane in which this plant was growing was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1988. She became so knowledgeable about *S. germanica* that she was asked to write the Biological Flora of the species (*Journal of Ecology* 85: 531–539, 1997). For an amateur botanist, this was a big achievement made possible by the help given by the editor, A.J. Willis, which she much appreciated.

The second project involved recording the flora at Ditchley, which Rosemary FitzGerald had started for her late cousin, Martin Wills (then managing the estate). After her work took her to Kent in 1985, Rosemary asked Jo to take over. For the next seven years, Jo tooth-combed the estate with passionate enthusiasm, which culminated in the publication of *The Flora of Ditchley – Wild Flowers of an Oxfordshire Estate* in 1993. She was also involved with other botanical activities, which included the BSBI Monitoring Scheme in 1987/88 and surveys for English Heritage (Deddington Castle, Minster Lovell Hall and North Leigh Roman Villa) in 1992. Later, Jo contributed details of about 20 of the 400 scarce species included in *Oxfordshire's Threatened Plants* (2018).

Jo had a flair for writing. Several articles she wrote were published, including one in *Country Life* entitled 'Wildflower Haven' about the Ditchley Estate. She contributed two papers to *Watsonia* on *Stachys germanica* (16: 430–431, 1987; 18: 359–367, 1991) and several articles to *BSBI News*, including one on conservation headlands for arable wild flowers (77: 45–46, 1997). She shared her great affection for

pollarded willows with BSBI members in another article in *BSBI News*, 'Plant life in pollarded willows' (66: 22–23, 1994). She had examined 400 pollards on the banks of the rivers Evenlode and Windrush in west Oxfordshire and recorded 74 species growing in their crowns.

Jo was one of the founder members of the Cotswold Rare Plants Group (CRPG) which was set up in 1995 to collect information about the rare plants of west Oxfordshire. As well as recording, Jo became involved with practical work like translocating *Muscari neglectum* (Grape-hyacinth) bulbs, collected before the site where they grew became built over, to safer locations nearby. She also bulked up two populations of *Stachys germanica*. Sadly, after Jo was no longer able to coordinate this group, membership fell and the cost of insurance increased, making the future of the group uncertain. It was saved in 2013 by bringing the group under the umbrella of the Wychwood Project when it changed its name to Wychwood Flora Group. Reaching a wider audience, membership grew and Jo's legacy continues to thrive.

Jo's work in recording and protecting the flora of west Oxfordshire was recognised in 2005 when she was awarded an MBE. To celebrate her 90th birthday in May 2010, members of the Oxfordshire and Wychwood Flora Groups took her to Otmoor to see the special plants which grow there.

Jo spent her last years in Burford Nursing Home, where she enjoyed watching birds on the feeders outside her room. Sadly, she became infected with coronavirus and died on 13 May 2020, 2 days after her 100th birthday. The words chosen by her nephew for her on-line memorial in the book of remembrance for all those who have died as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, set up by St Paul's Cathedral, were very fitting: 'In memory of a dedicated botanist whose passion for her subject was only equalled by her loyalty shown to her many friends and family'.

I am grateful to Rosemary FitzGerald and Tim Bowyer, Jo's nephew, for their help in compiling this obituary.

---

Brenda Betteridge