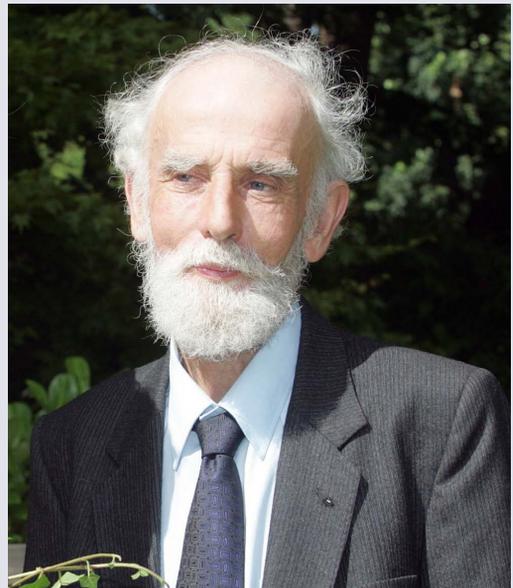


JOHN HARRON (1944–2020)

John Harron was a quiet and modest man who died at his North Down home on 22 October 2020. An exceptional field botanist, he was a BSBI member for 47 years and made an enormous contribution to the known flora of the north-east of Ireland. The BSBI database holds almost 100,000 field records attributed to John Harron – roughly a third from Co Down (H38) and a further third from Co Antrim (H39). The remainder are spread across other Ulster counties.

John was born on 29 July 1944 in Helen's Bay (Co Down), the eldest of Kathleen and William Harron's five children. He attended Glencraig Primary School and Holywood Technical College. After a brief period in London, he worked in Belfast for a chartered surveyor. Even in his early years, he



John Harron, photographed in 2005. *Andrew Peden*

liked to head off to the Mourne or Donegal on his bicycle, while staying at youth hostels. He had a talent for sketching and developed a passion for drawing maps. He completed two years Voluntary Service Overseas in Gambia (1979–1981) and after that he opted for a life outside the rat-race, returning to Helen’s Bay and working on the neighbouring Mackie’s estate as a gardener.

John is best known for his *Flora of Lough Neagh* (1986), which showcased his meticulous field records to a wider audience. Before this, lists of John’s notable finds had already appeared in the pages of the *Irish Naturalists’ Journal*, while in 1972 the Belfast Naturalists’ Field Club published the supplement to the second edition of the *Flora of the North-east of Ireland* which contained John’s records from within the area of that Flora (Down, Antrim, Londonderry). John subsequently provided a huge number of records which were incorporated into the third edition of this *Flora* when it duly appeared in 1992. John’s name appears on the title page alongside Stan Beesley and Doreen Lambert as Paul Hackney’s effective co-authors.

In 1987–88 the BSBI carried out recording for its Monitoring Scheme and John was the most assiduous of the contributors from Northern Ireland. Paul Hackney well remembers receiving thick parcels of completed cards which were duly passed on to an astonished Tim Rich who remarked that he wished that he had a dozen more John Harrons for the Scheme. John later showed the same commitment to the BSBI Atlas 2000 scheme.

Leading up to Atlas 2020, some Ulster vice-county recorders started to receive the most amazing correspondence from John Harron. Over 2–3 years, John painstakingly collated thousands of unpublished post-2000 records for Antrim and Londonderry and posted them for us to digitise. He re-visited good sites to update records of rare plants, which made a big difference to recent coverage in these vice-counties. It was a huge pleasure to receive this treasure trove and we found that John’s field records were brought to life by his ability to write wonderfully vivid and perceptive accounts of the plants and habitats that he knew and understood. He

truly was a remarkable field naturalist, committed to the tradition of recording and documenting Ireland’s wild flora. There were very few, if any, of his contemporaries who could match his dedication and expertise practised over so many decades.

After the death of his mother (1983) and father (1986), John began to travel in the winter, setting off with a small backpack and a huge camera. He visited many countries, including Morocco, Ethiopia, Yemen, Israel, Turkey, India, South Africa, South America, Australia and New Zealand, not only exploring them but also photographing and studying them, all the time respecting and appreciating each and every culture that he stumbled upon. At home, John was a very generous and hospitable host with a great commitment to his extended family. He always had food and drinks to share and made a great effort to round everyone up for a Halloween bonfire.

The eulogy at John’s funeral ended with these words. ‘John was fiercely independent, highly intelligent, thoughtful and sensitive and had the rare ability to listen to others with focus and genuine interest. He had a strong sense of family and was a life force, at one with the landscape and nature.’

I would like to thank the members of the Ulster botanical recording community who sent in tributes to John. I’m also grateful to John’s family for permission to reproduce the photograph included here. A personal appreciation by Ian McNeill is included below.

David McNeill

John Harron – a personal appreciation

I first met John Harron in December 1983 when I visited him in his home at Helen’s Bay, on the Co Down side of Belfast Lough. I had been botanising in the Cookstown area from 1980, and had made contact with the BSBI and Doreen Lambert, the Recorder for Co Tyrone. I soon heard about John Harron, and Doreen encouraged me to get in touch with him. So, on the evening of 2 December, my son David and I arrived at John’s home.

We were given a very warm welcome, and soon we were talking animatedly about flowers, about the

joys of stumbling on a rare plant, our mutual love of the landscape of Ulster. My 1983 diary summarised the evening: ‘great evening of ‘flower-talk’’. John had completed his formal education at 15, but his subsequent self-education was truly remarkable. He had encyclopaedic knowledge of the plants of Ulster (and further afield) and this went back into the historical record. He had a working knowledge of geology, of soil types and the other ancillary -ologies needed by a field-botanist. His bookshelves were stacked with flower-guides and county floras, but also all sorts of books on many other interests.

We marvelled, too, at how he had adopted a very alternative lifestyle, and was happy with it. Apart from his books, he lived frugally. He made enough money from gardening to keep the wolf from the door. But he hadn’t to face the daily commute, he had no boss breathing down his neck – he traded those things for his freedom.

We arranged that he should come to Cookstown the following summer and see around our patch. This he duly did, and he visited us in Cookstown and East Tyrone several times over the next couple of years. Eventually we settled on a routine where John and I met up for a day’s botanising once or twice a year, usually on ‘neutral’ ground in Co Derry or Co Antrim.

To see John in the ‘field’ was to see a master at work. He had so many field skills. First of all, he could look at his OS map and know immediately where the ‘plum’ spots were likely to be. He had uncanny skill, when he looked around him, of finding the best place to seek the good plants. He could name almost any plant just from its appearance. If he had to study it through a lens, he knew exactly what to look for, perhaps hairs on the sepals or some such key feature. I never saw him use a field-card – he noted down details of any rarer plant in a notebook.

He would march over uninteresting ground at some speed but could spend an hour on a spot of good ground. He could walk over a bog and not get stuck in the mire. He could crawl under a barbed-wire fence, the barbs an inch from his face. He could wade through rivers. John particularly loved river valleys and glens and described rivers as nature’s

highways. He had a remarkable sense of knowing what to expect in any given terrain or what plants had a community affinity to one another. So, on a piece of rocky heath he would announce: ‘we should be finding *Cirsium dissectum* here’, and then, almost immediately: ‘ah, there it is’.

Sometimes he could be outrageously dramatic. I can still see him in the grounds of a Cookstown hotel pointing at the ground in front of him and declaiming, in true Shakespearean fashion: ‘I am in the presence of a very rare grass’. It was *Poa chaixii*.

For a few years around 1970 John concentrated on a remarkable study of the flora around Lough Neagh. He would walk several miles of lough shore in a day. Some of this time he had no car and had to depend on public transport. I challenge you to work out the logistics of that from a base at Helen’s Bay.

Pat Kertland was a leading light in Ulster botany at the time and she gradually persuaded John to turn his vast store of Lough Neagh records into a Flora, so that others could share in the fruits of his labour. She recruited Brian Rushton, from the University of Ulster at Coleraine, to mentor John in the mysteries of Flora production and subsequent printing and producing a book. John and Brian worked well together, but it was a case of slow but steady progress. The book came on sale in 1986 entitled, simply, *Flora of Lough Neagh*. No frills, no glamour, but superb in what it set out to do, to give details of the plants to be found around the lake, set in a background of the general ecology of the lake. There were distribution maps for rarer plants. I said: ‘no glamour’, but the front cover was most evocative with its wonderful silhouette view of the beautiful Flowering Rush – thanks to David Ledsham.

Coming up to the BSBI proposed Atlas 2000, John planned to re-visit Lough Neagh to get an up-to-date view. He was horrified. With modern machinery, drainage of marshland had gone on apace. Intensive farming had conquered. The ground was enriched by run-off from fields and the polluted water of the lake had come onshore in periods of flood. Where there were once little marshy fields, now large fields of Perennial Ryegrass grazing came within an inch of the lake. In places

reed-beds had become so invasive that John could not get near the lake. In the autumn, dead algae and other plant material washed up on the shore, and lay rotting and stinking. John was devastated. He was heartbroken. His book was now a catalogue of past glory, no longer a living account of a vibrant pulsating ecological system.

Is there hope? Well, yes, many of the rarer plants are still to be found, but in isolated, vulnerable pockets. In 2013 John and I visited the Annaghdroghal area. This is where Co Down reaches Lough Neagh for just about a kilometre of lough shore. We were pleased to find really good ground that still felt like the Lough Neagh of old. Things will never revert to what they were, but perhaps recent climate change worries and more awareness of our need to stop the destruction of nature might at least stop further disaster.

Though John was a member of BSBI for nearly 50 years, I never knew him to attend a BSBI field-meeting. He could have contributed so much. In

2019 I organised a field-meeting for the Tyrone shore of Lough Neagh, and I rang John. Could he join us? I really believe he was on the verge of agreeing to come. But on the day, no, he did not turn up.

And yet John was incredibly sociable. When we met up, we rather formally shook hands and immediately fell into conversation. We talked all day – the flowers at our feet, the landscape, current affairs. Often we solved major world problems, but the world would not listen.

I count it an immense privilege to have known John. He taught me so much from his vast store of knowledge. Many of the places we visited were scenically very beautiful, but their beauty was enhanced by John's interpretive skills – he saw things that I had not seen, or maybe had seen but had dismissed as insignificant. At the end of a day in the field with John Harron, the world seemed a better and more beautiful place.

Ian McNeill