

OBITUARIES

Compiled by Chris D. Preston, Obituaries Editor

19 Green's Road, Cambridge CB4 3EF

cdpr@ceh.ac.uk

TREVOR JOHN JAMES (1947–2020)

Despite being widely travelled (partly as a tour leader for Naturetrek) and a significant player on the national biological recording stage, Trevor James' most enduring legacy is surely his work to describe, record and conserve the natural history of his beloved home county of Hertfordshire. He was the quintessential county naturalist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of its flora and fauna, habitats, geography and history, and fought tirelessly in support of conservation goals and organisations. He produced two superlative monographs: *Flora of Hertfordshire* (James, 2009) and *Beetles of Hertfordshire* (James, 2018), the latter being the first ever county Coleoptera fauna for the UK covering over 2,500 species, and utilised as avidly by entomologists in adjacent counties as in Herts itself. A separate obituary by Paul Harding (Harding, 2020) contains an appreciation of Trevor as an entomologist. He inspired and mentored generations of enthusiasts keen to improve their identification and recording skills. Indeed, some of the most moving tributes following his death in 2020 come from those who attended excursions and workshops organised by Trevor and his wife Chris over several decades. For example: 'he was the leader of the gang' (William Bishop) and 'he was the most amazing person I have ever known' (June Crew).

Trevor was born on 16 September 1947 in Kenton, Middlesex, the son of Joseph William and Ivy Verdun James (both were born in 1916). The James family relocated to Cuffley in South-east Herts when he was five years old. The new house needed extensive modernisation and this benefited from his father's occupation as a concrete engineer. Here, easy access (at that time) to open countryside stimulated a consuming interest in all facets of natural history. His initial passion was for birds and he became involved



Trevor James: entomologist as well as botanist! June Crew

in producing a newsletter for a local bird club. However, supported initially by a like-minded teacher at Cuffley Primary School his interests expanded rapidly to encompass all groups of organisms, as well as broader aspects of ecology, local history and land management. Although his quota of A-levels obtained at Hertford Grammar School included Biology, his subject of choice as an undergraduate at the University of York was English Literature. University life promoted additional enthusiasms including amateur dramatics (behind rather than on the stage!) and archaeology. Attendance during several summer vacations at an excavation on the north coast of Mainland, Orkney initiated a life-

long affection for that archipelago and the Scottish Islands in general.

Like many facing the end of a degree course, Trevor was confronted with the question of what to do next. There was a brief excursion into librarianship but the novelty soon wore off. A series of chance events led to his appointment in 1973 as Keeper of Natural History at the Hitchin Museum, where John Dony retained an association as ‘Honorary Keeper of Botany’. In collaboration with a fellow employee, Brian Sawford, Trevor applied his emerging skills in record-keeping and curation to overhaul the recording infrastructure in what became a semi-autonomous county ‘Natural History Unit’. An unexpected inheritance at this time enabled the purchase of a property in Ashwell, north Hertfordshire, where he was based for the rest of his life. He was an enthusiastic participant in voluntary work on local nature reserves. At one such event he admits in a recent memoir (see below) to being captivated by the lady leading the work party. The lady in question was Chris Smith, who became Trevor’s wife two years later in 1979 and they had a son Edward in 1987.

His appointment in 1988 as Head of Ecology in a fledgling Herts Environmental Records Centre (HERC) was a logical step on from the museum post and despite frustrations imposed by local government politics he contributed hugely to consolidating HERC as the county’s main repository of biological data supported by appropriate IT technology. However, his experience and skills in these areas were soon to become manifest on a national scale. He assisted with consolidating ‘Recorder’ software as the platform of choice within a fledgling National Federation of Biological Recording (NFBR), and his subsequent appointment in 1995 as chair of NFBR gave him a pivotal role in founding and funding the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) as a UK-wide and taxon-wide data-sharing partnership. He initially served as an NBN trustee but resigned that position in 2001 to take up the post of NBN Project Officer, working alongside the Chief Executive Jim Munford and based at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) at Monks Wood. He retired as a CEH employee in 2012.

Trevor became plant recorder for the Herts Natural History Society in 1978 and in 1982 he (initially with Brian Sawford) succeeded John Dony as BSBI vice-county recorder for Hertfordshire (v.c.20). My first significant encounter with Trevor after I moved to the county was at a meeting he convened in 1987 to launch a programme of recording in support of a new county Flora (James, 2009). Use of the same tetrad mapping system pioneered by Dony in his 1967 *Flora of Hertfordshire* allowed a quantitative assessment of declines and increases in plant distributions over the intervening decades. Regrettably there were considerably more of the former than of the latter, a feature shared by most counties subject to ongoing urbanisation and agricultural intensification. There have nonetheless been exciting new finds, one highlight being Trevor’s discovery in east Herts of a native sedge, *Carex cespitosa*, new to Britain and Ireland (James et al., 2012). This species continues to thrive in its sole location and is one of the county’s botanical treasures. As well as being a vice-county recorder, Trevor served for many years on BSBI’s Publications and Records Committees and as a member of BSBI Council. For some members, his name may be most familiar for adorning the front cover of *BSBI News*, which he co-edited with Gwynn Ellis between 2008 and 2017. His multiple and long-standing contributions to our society were recognised through election as an Honorary Member at the 2017 AGM. Other accolades and awards include the prestigious 1875 Medal given by the HNHS to outstanding Herts naturalists, NBN’s Gilbert White medal, an honorary Masters degree from the University of Hertfordshire and a thoroughly deserved British Empire Medal in the 2020 New Year Honours list.

Trevor was diagnosed with cancer in 2016. Treatment and surgery initially gave a favourable prognosis but ensuing complications required frequent and debilitating bouts of therapy at Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge. Confronted by such life-threatening developments, Trevor was determined above all else to bring his beetles monograph to fruition. Periods confined to bed at Addenbrookes were spent proof-reading the

manuscript, while his walks in the hospital grounds provided the BSBI recorder for Cambs, Jonathan Shanklin, with several new botanical records. He passed away on 5 June 2020 and was buried in Ashwell village cemetery, very fittingly attired in field clothes and bush hat, accompanied by notebook, hand-lens and binoculars!

Shortly before his death Trevor completed work on a memoir entitled 'Chance Encounters – following nature's lead' (James, 2020). Copies are available from Chris James (chrisjames56@btinternet.com) in exchange for a donation of £10 (or preferably more) to the Garden House Hospice in Letchworth, where Trevor spent his final days.

References

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Ian Denholm