

NORMAN KEITH BONNER ROBSON (1928–2021)

The name Norman Robson probably means little to many BSBI members, but, for over 30 years, he was much involved in the society's activities.

Norman was born in Aberdeen on 31 March 1928, the only child of Norman Keith Robson, a professional plantsman and director of W. Smith & Son, a firm founded in 1842, and his wife Adeline Hastings Bonner. Ill health and World War II disrupted Norman's schooling, but in 1946 he was able to commence a degree in agriculture at Aberdeen University. However, after a year he transferred to botany, his final honours project being on the British species of *Hypericum*, the genus which was to dominate his professional life. His PhD studies at the University of Edinburgh extended his earlier work, leading to

his 1956 thesis 'Studies in the genus *Hypericum*'. From 1956 to 1962 Norman worked as a Scientific Officer at Kew, moving to what was then known as the British Museum (Natural History) in 1962. Here he took charge of Section 1 (Families 1, Ranunculaceae to 66, Combretaceae, according to Bentham & Hooker's *Genera Plantarum*) in the General Herbarium (non-European flowering plants and gymnosperms). John Cannon, another BSBI stalwart, was in charge of Section 2, William Stearn of *Botanical Latin* fame in charge of Section 3, and John Lewis, in charge of Section 4 (monocotyledons). Norman continued in this role until retirement in 1988, but regularly came into the Museum as a Scientific Associate until Covid restrictions prevented access. Although most



Norman Robson c.1962. By permission of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum

of Norman's career was spent in the Museum it often seemed as though his heart remained at Kew; when asked for curatorial or other advice, his usual reply was that when he next visited Kew he would ask how things were done there.

Some of these Kew visits resulted from his service on the Family Planning Committee, a name which provided Norman with quiet amusement, set up so that botanists at Kew and the Natural History Museum could discuss minor adaptations to the Bentham and Hooker system. Major adaptations which might involve moving hundreds or thousands of specimens were considered impractical.

Norman's great respect for Kew was part of his steadfast regard for what might be called the establishment – the monarchy, the Conservative Party (considered to be 'the natural party of government'), the Royal Horticultural Society, the All England Lawn Tennis Club, the National Trust, the Linnean Society, the BSBI and the Museum's Senior Common Room (a dingy, almost windowless, smoke-filled room off

a corridor in the Museum's basement). When the Museum authorities decided that cars would no longer be allowed to park in the Museum's forecourt, Norman suggested that an exception should be made for senior members of staff who might need to go on to the Linnean Society, despite the fact you could get there quickly and easily in only three stops on the Piccadilly line.

Norman's monograph of *Hypericum*, covering almost 500 species, was published in nine parts, initially in the *Bulletin of the British Museum (Natural History) Botany*, between 1977 and 2012. There was talk of a revised, semi-popular version being produced for the Timber Press, but sadly this never materialised. Once the *Hypericum* monograph was completed it was planned to produce a synopsis of the neotropical genus *Vismia*, but, despite identifying hundreds of specimens sent from the Missouri Botanical Garden and elsewhere, this never came to fruition.

According to the Tropicos database, Norman was responsible for the production of 228 plant names – new species or new combinations. Other members of the Botany Department frequently sought his advice when preparing Latin descriptions of new species, or on the interpretation of the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature*. He also tried to teach junior members of staff how to identify plant families, placing great importance on the presence or absence of stipules. These sessions involved the use of herbarium sheets, most of which had filing numbers written on their bottom left-hand corner. Thus 1/10 indicated that a sheet should be filed as family 1, Ranunculaceae, genus 10, *Ranunculus*. Norman tried to erase such numbers before each session, but it was not always easy to do this, and often his students looked more closely at the corner of the sheet than at the plant under discussion.

Norman joined the BSBI in 1951, and served in many roles including that of an editor of the society's journal *Watsonia* from 1968 to 1988, functioning as reviews editor for much of that time. He was also a member of Meetings Committee from 1991 to 2008 (serving as its chairman in 1992–93), a vice-president 1985–89, and a member of the Executive Committee in 1991–93. He served as referee for various genera:

Oxycoccus (1983–92), *Malva* and *Vaccinium* (1983–95), and *Hypericum* (1983 until his death). He was elected as an honorary member in 1988. From 1968 to 1976 he also served as editor of the *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society*, and it was usual for him to devote his mornings to editorial work before moving on to *Hypericum* research and museum duties in the afternoon. From 1963 to 1988 the BSBI's Annual Exhibition Meetings were held in the old General Herbarium of the Natural History Museum. This entailed a great clearing up of the area which Norman oversaw, ensuring that bench tops were cleared and polished. When the AEM moved to elsewhere in the Museum, and then to nearby Baden Powell House, Norman's interest in the event and the BSBI in general gradually declined. Possibly with most of the older generation for whom he had great respect, and many of his contemporaries, no longer active, BSBI events lacked the social appeal which he had previously enjoyed.

Beyond botany Norman's interests included music and gardening, and he was a regular church-goer. He played the violin with a small group of Museum

musicians, and with the Royal Orchestral Society, where he met his wife Eve, who survives him.

He took care of his possessions; if he lent you a book you would immediately place it on the cleanest available surface and read it as quickly as possible so that it could be returned unharmed. He saved odd lengths of string and used envelopes and took them along to the departmental office for others to re-use. His attitude to money was typically Aberdonian; he would pay his fair share but carefully avoid unnecessary expenditure. However, Norman, who died on 6 September 2021, will be remembered mainly as a quiet, ever courteous and unflappable colleague to whom one could turn for advice, which was sometimes enlivened by subtle humour. And, of course, his work on *Hypericum* will remain the firm foundation for any future work on St John's-worts.

I am grateful to Alison Paul, Jenny Bryant, Mark Carine and other past and present NHM colleagues who generously shared their knowledge of Norman.

Roy Vickery