

# OBITUARIES

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## PHYLLIS PATRICIA ABBOTT (1936–2021)

Born Phyllis Patricia Rockley in Newton, Derbyshire, on 31 October 1936, to Lily and John (known as Jack) Rockley, Phyl spent her early life in Teversal, North Nottinghamshire, close to Silverhill Colliery where her father worked as a miner. The house backed on to open fields which Phyl loved to wander over as a young girl and where she must have delighted in the diversity of wildflowers at a time before the growth of intensive agriculture took its toll. This early close encounter must have played a part in her developing botanical interests.

Phyl attended Teversal Primary School and then, after passing the 11 plus, Brunts Grammar School, Mansfield, where she met Cedric Abbott. She was persuaded by a teacher there that, with her aptitude for languages, she should consider going to university and so, while Cedric went to Birmingham University to study medicine, Phyl went to Sheffield where she gained a First Class Honours degree in French, after also studying German and Latin, the latter proving very useful as Phyl's botanical activities increased.

After graduating in 1958 she went to Birmingham to study for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and then taught French at Rowley Regis Grammar School. She married Cedric in 1959. When he joined the Pathology Department at Leeds General Infirmary in 1963 they moved to Cookridge, North Leeds, with easy access to fields and woods for further botanising. In 1970, when Phyl's daughter Jackie and son Mike were old enough, she returned to teaching in Leeds, eventually retiring from the profession in 1991.

In 1972 Phyl joined Leeds Naturalists' Club and was soon afterwards made President and, after that, Secretary, a role she fulfilled from 1978 to 1991. Also in the 1970s, she joined the Wild Flower Society (WFS), BSBI, Swarthmore Botany Club, Bradford Botany Group, the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union



Phyl Abbott photographing *Eleocharis acicularis* at Semerwater, Yorkshire, July 2005. Judith Allinson

(YNU) and several other relevant conservation organisations. Phyl's first WFS Field Botanist's diary, for 1972–73, records wildflowers from around Leeds, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, near her parents' house, locations in the Yorkshire Dales, and from family holidays wider afield. In 1974 Phyl's WFS diary recorded 796 species and contained a letter from Barbara Garratt, who oversaw the diaries, congratulating her for getting into Valhalla (!), an exclusive group within the WFS, entry to which is granted on the basis of the number and quality of species' records.

Living in Leeds, Phyl benefited greatly from membership of Leeds Naturalists' Club, which was then well supported by academics from Leeds University, and from a number of natural history mentors including Drs Nelson and Sledge from the University, Mrs Houseman, Miss Kilby from the

Swarthmoor Botany Club and Adrian Norris and John Armitage from Leeds Museum.

Phyl's first WFS diary also contains a letter from Mrs Garratt, and which made reference to the Lady's-slipper *Cypripedium calceolus*, indicating Phyl's early involvement with the very secretive project to conserve and reintroduce this species to its former sites. She was a member of the *Cypripedium* Committee, which co-ordinates work on the species, for at least 15 years (retiring in 2017). With her in-depth knowledge of the Yorkshire Dales, Phyl was very involved with the reintroduction programme, aimed at re-establishing the orchid across its native range in northern England. She identified potential new reintroduction sites and, in partnership with landowners, helped plant out Lady's-slippers such as those that delight visitors to Kilnsey Park in Upper Wharfedale each summer.

It is probably true to say that Phyl's heart never wholly lay in teaching French and she was far happier botanising. By the time she retired from teaching her botanical knowledge and reputation had grown to the extent that she was offered a number of professional botanical survey contracts, particularly during the 1990s. These included land in Upper Wharfedale and Langstrothdale for the National Trust, potential Natural Heritage Sites in Barnsley District, a Phase 1 habitat survey for Harrogate District, rare canal plants of north-west England, drains of Hatfield Chase, a Phase 1 survey of Potteric Carr environs in 1995, an ecological survey of Saxton Cross, Tingley, and, for English Nature, surveys of Thistle Broomrape *Orobanche reticulata*. Complementing this, in 1996 Phyl became YNU Botanical Recorder for v.c. 64, Mid-west Yorkshire, a role she continued in until 2018; she was BSBI Recorder for the same county from 1997 until 2008.

During the early 1980s Phyl had perceived a gap in the local botanical literature since, although floras focusing on Leeds and Harrogate had been published in 1963 and 1978 respectively, nothing had been published on the whole of the West Riding since 1888! Consequently, Phyl embarked on the recording required for a tetrad atlas for v.c. 64. She originally envisaged that the project would take about five years. Despite the assistance of other volunteer

botanists, the *Plant Atlas of Mid-west Yorkshire*, Phyl's *magnum opus*, took rather longer than anticipated, as is so often the case (she claimed four times as long), and was not ready for publishing by the YNU until 2005. It is clear from the introduction that compiling the *Atlas* was a mammoth task, not only of recording plants but also collaborating with a very large number of people, both of which were executed superbly by Phyl. The *Atlas* is described as filling 'a huge gap in our knowledge of one of the prime botanical regions of the British Isles' (Wilmore, 2006). Phyl also wrote for botanical bulletins, as well as authoring and co-authoring scholarly articles for *The Naturalist* and regularly giving talks to a variety of organisations. The year after the *Atlas* was published, Phyl was made President of the YNU for 2006–07. Her Presidential Address was entitled 'Rare plants in Mid-west Yorkshire: why are they only on limestone?' (Abbott, 2008).

Despite being primarily a Yorkshire botanist, Phyl was an enthusiastic participant in several of the BSBI's overseas excursions, including visits to Turkey (1997), Cyprus (2004), Transylvania (2009) and Estonia (2010). She and Cedric were very welcome members of these groups, particularly as they were such excellent photographers. Phyl was often to be found shoulder to the ground capturing a good shot of a plant that had caught her eye, with Cedric offering advice close by. She was also a most assiduous note taker, characteristically armed with her tiny notebook and stubby pencil as she listened to the group leader giving information at the start of a visit. This meant that later she could always be relied upon to confirm details of a site or a species name. In Transylvania Phyl had a lucky escape when the overhead light above her bed came crashing down in the middle of the night but, seemingly unfazed by this, she produced some of her best photos the next day on the alpine slopes around Lake Balea.

Phyl was a quiet, unassuming, very reliable person who worked tirelessly and determinedly at everything she did. She participated actively in the many organisations she belonged to and made a major contribution to our knowledge of Yorkshire's flora and its distribution. She remained active up until

2019, when, on a holiday with her brother, Howard, and sister-in-law Marion, in South Africa, one of Phyl's favourite overseas botanical hunting grounds, she was still able to ascend a rickety ladder in search of plants. In November of the same year, she suffered a stroke which very sadly curtailed her activities and affected her ability to remember plant names, which before then had been encyclopaedic. It transpired in a hospital admission for (non-Covid) pneumonia in February 2021 that the gradually deteriorating shortness of breath Phyl had been experiencing for a couple of years was due to pulmonary fibrosis. The pneumonia severely exacerbated her existing condition and Phyl died peacefully in her sleep in a Lichfield nursing home on 18 April 2021, with Jackie and Mike at her side. At her funeral the coffin was

a memorable sight, covered by coloured photos of *Cypripedium*.

This obituary is based on one originally published in *The Naturalist* (Millard, 2021). I am grateful to Jane Croft and Colin Newlands for providing additional material.

### References

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**Andy Millard**