

RICHARD JOHN PANKHURST PhD., FLS (1940 – 2013)

Richard went to Hamond's Grammar School, Swaffham, Norfolk. He had outstanding abilities in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry and it became clear that he could pursue a career in nuclear physics. There was another side to Richard which was already strongly evident at school. He was an extremely dedicated botanist and made many expeditions into the countryside to discover the variety of species in different locations and the occasional occurrence of an example of a rare species. His parents, who were also keen amateur botanists, actively encouraged him in this activity. His school had only recently extended the curriculum to include Biology and formal academic study of Botany was not relevant for Richard, as he could pursue his interest through practical observation and direct exploration of the countryside, which he did with great enthusiasm.

He went on to study Physics at St John's College, Cambridge, and, typically for him, after graduating in 1962, his interest in 'Atoms for Peace' led him to CERN, Switzerland. Meanwhile, he married Anne, in 1963.

He returned to UK academic life in 1966 at the Cambridge University Computer Laboratory, in the Computer Aided Design group. Then, under the influence of Max Walters, he moved to the university Botany School and began the task of modelling the taxonomy of plants. It was a major and innovative initiative, which opened up the world of plant life to computer-based applications. He was frustrated when people came along later and tried to re-solve problems he'd already investigated, but also proud of what he had achieved – no more so than when Scottish botanical recorders recently started using his computer key to dandelions (*Taraxacum*). It was typical of Richard that he looked wider than his passion for botany in applications of computer keys, and among his publications is one co-authored with a doctor, with medical diagnosis for the use of health workers in remote areas of Africa (where there is no

doctor). His many presentations at conferences and membership of the Biodiversity Information Standards (TDWG) and Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) consolidated international connections with taxonomists working in similar fields, and, when travelling around the world, he never seemed to lack a botanical friend who could tell him where the best flowering plants were to be viewed.

He moved to the British Museum (Natural History) (BM) in 1974 as curator of the British Herbarium and to continue work on applications of computers in plant taxonomy, but before long the BM decided to undertake a project to do fieldwork and write a flora for a part of the British Isles that did not have one, and the Outer Hebrides was chosen. Richard first went there on a BM field expedition in 1979, made a number of subsequent trips, and when it came time to write up the flora, he was an obvious choice and was the lead author in the *Flora of the Outer Hebrides* (Pankhurst & Mullin, 1991, 1994). This has been an enduring publication, and has been reprinted several times, most recently in 2012.

Unfortunately cuts at the BM resulted in the laying off of many staff just as the *Flora* appeared, and Richard was one of those who lost their jobs. He was able to find a new position at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (RBGE), which he joined in 1991, continuing his work in the application of computer methods and databases to taxonomy and curation. He worked on many projects, but one in particular, on the collation of information on the Rosaceae into a database, occupied many years. Richard was meticulous in what he did. He photographed many obscure references for the rose family database, but he didn't stop there – he straightened the images, captured the text, and in some cases these versions have been put on-line.

He retired in 2000, but this did not really make much difference – he still went to RBGE daily, and carried on with research and work

much as before. It did allow him a little more freedom to travel and trips were often centred on botanical conferences or field meetings, or were treated as a chance to see a new flora.

I first met Richard in 1994. He had not long before taken over as vice-county recorder for the Outer Hebrides (v.c.110). In many ways he was ideal for the role, with an extensive knowledge of British botany and computer databases, and a flora already under his belt. Doing things properly (I was to learn that he was good at doing things properly), he ran a field meeting on South Uist, the first for many years. Several people came to see particular rare species – rather to Richard’s annoyance at the time, as he didn’t always know where they were. But he was gracious in doing his best to find them! I was lucky to get a late cancellation space and had a great time seeing many plants new to me, with Richard helping with identification. He was always very helpful to people who wanted to learn, and was a staunch supporter of the BSBI’s educational field meetings.

He invited me back to the Outer Hebrides a couple of years later, and got me hooked on the flora. Eventually we became a partnership doing the duties of vice-county recorder for the Outer Hebrides, which worked well for more than a decade. But I really got one of the best apprenticeships available! He was often in the vanguard of new technology, being first with a GPS, a tracking GPS, and recording onto a palmtop computer in the field.

He had a long association with the BSBI, serving on several committees and working on

its databases. He did a stint as chair of the Scottish committee, and did his usual thorough job, visiting the AGMs of the parallel committees in Wales and Ireland and the Annual Exhibition Meeting, both as a representative of Scotland and to see what tricks and tips could be learned. He was meticulous in the field too, actively enjoying looking at critical plant groups and encouraging others in the same activity. It was he who got me started collecting dandelions, and it’s fitting that a new dandelion species from St Kilda, *Taraxacum pankhurstianum*, was named after him in 2012.

Richard was diagnosed with cancer in 2011, but he carried on bravely, adjusting to it, and still managed several botanical trips to Scottish islands in 2012. He made two trips to the Outer Hebrides that year, including a visit to Gaseir, an islet about five miles from anywhere, and full of flowers (see Colour Section, Plate 1).

Richard was a committed Christian throughout his life, and practised his faith. It was central to many things that he did, and he and Anne were very hospitable to a wide range of visitors. He was a regular worshipper at St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh where his memorial service was held. Richard was an exceptional man, a very experienced botanist and taxonomist, and someone who helped others through teaching and encouragement wherever he went. He is survived by his wife Anne and daughter Lucie.

PAUL SMITH



Richard Pankhurst on Gasker, Outer Hebrides, July 2012. Photo © Paul Smith