

OBITUARIES

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DAVID ELLISTON ALLEN (1932–2023)

David Allen died in July last year, aged 91. He is well known for being one of Europe's foremost authorities on brambles (*Rubus*) and had a lifelong interest in botany, but he was also an accomplished historian and 'social anthropologist', with a passion for researching the social history and culture of British naturalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He wrote or contributed to several books on these subjects and in all published more than 400 notes, articles and papers.

David was born in Southport, Lancashire on 17 January 1932, to Joan and Col. Gerald Allen, a solicitor, and had an older sister, Elizabeth. In July 1940 he attended Bilton Grange Preparatory School in Rugby, Warwickshire. At this early age he was already developing a keen interest in botany and won a wild flower competition in 1941, still only aged 9, for which he received a copy of *Wild Flowers of the Wayside and Woodland*. In 1945 he gained a scholarship to Rugby School where he specialised in Classics and won several school prizes and a general knowledge competition; he also became Secretary of the school's Natural History Society. He compiled a list of the flora of the Rugby area in the society's report for 1948, commenting that 'Canadian fleabane (*Erigeron canadensis*) has arrived, as predicted in last year's report.' At Rugby he met another aspiring botanist, Humphry J.M. Bowen, who was three years his senior (at this time the tradition of younger boys doing jobs for older boys was still kept up, and David delightedly told me on more than one occasion that he was Humphry Bowen's fag). By his final year at the school he was directing his house orchestra and playing solo clarinet.

David's botanical mentor during his early life (and probably throughout his schooldays) was



David Allen, c. 2000.

Alexander (Alec) D. Walker, who was a family friend and business associate of his father. Walker was an accountant, working out of offices on the Isle of Man and Liverpool, and owned a farm estate on the Isle of Man where his family spent each summer. Walker, who was a keen botanist and also a Rugby old boy, would invite David over for botanising visits, taking him around the island by car. David made numerous visits there to study the flora and eventually published his *Flora of the Isle of Man* in 1984.

After leaving Rugby School David went on to Clare College, Cambridge in 1950, initially to read Law, but after only half a term realised that it was not for him so he switched to a joint degree of Archaeology and Anthropology, graduating in 1953. In a typewritten document with the tongue-in-cheek title of 'My brilliant career', he recounts that he thought about changing again to a botanical subject, but this would have meant staying on an additional year and 'one way or another it did not work out'. He had his eye on a career at Kew but

mistakenly assumed that a Botany degree was a necessity for this and he explained that he ‘resisted attempts to lure me there and fatally assumed I must wander down other avenues’.

David’s first job after leaving university was a trainee with the Natural History department of Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, where he recalls unexpectedly undertaking a six month period of immersion in the history of art. He then spent eight years in market research, initially gaining a job by walking in off the street into the offices of an advertising agency. He remarked that his anthropology degree came in useful during this part of his career, particularly when conducting a major survey of the market for contemporary furniture; one of his contributions was a report titled ‘The Future of the Wardrobe’. In later years he worked as a buyer of sample surveys from subcontractors, and explains that he developed ‘a fascination with the often sharp regional differences in patterns of consumer behaviour – a transference into that other sphere of my long-standing fascination with the distribution patterns exhibited by plants’.

Whilst employed in market research the idea for a book developed and in 1965 he took the bold step of quitting work to write full time for the next two years. His first book, *British Tastes*, was published in 1967 to a ‘blaze of almost stupefying publicity, which I had never anticipated’. This included a whole page in the Sunday Times, numerous reviews and seven television appearances. He explains that this was ‘rather an embarrassment’ since by this time he had returned to full time employment with the Social Science Research Council (later the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC), where he was ‘mingling with the top echelons of Academia’.

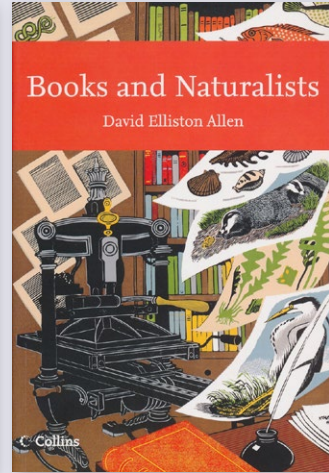
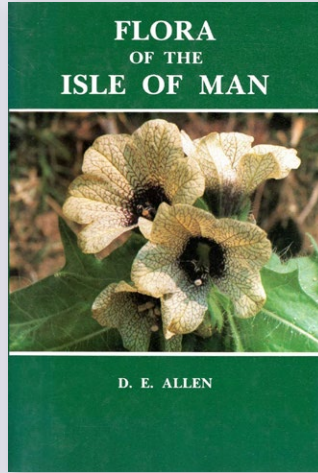
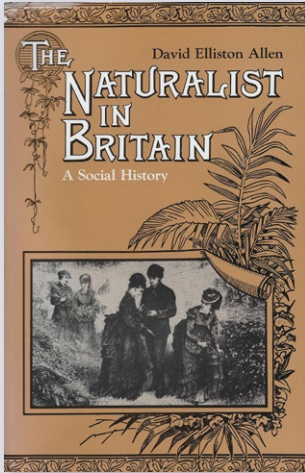
At the ESRC he inherited the administrative responsibility for a somewhat problematic national computerised data archive (though ironically he virtually never used a computer in his life) and also founded what is now the National Statistics Users Council, on which he initially served as Secretary. The data archive was taken on by the University of Essex where it flourished and now holds the UK’s largest collection of social, economic and population

data. Whilst at ESRC he also met his future wife Clare; they were married in 1972 and bought a house in Winchester, Hampshire, where they lived until 2020.

In 1986, after 19 years with ESRC, David jumped at the opportunity to retire early, so he would have more time to pursue his other interests; however, realising he still needed to supplement his pension he joined the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine and did some freelance lecturing in the History of Biology (jointly at the Institute and University College London). This soon led to him taking on the role of Co-ordinator of the History of Medicine grants programme for the Wellcome Trust (who funded the Institute). During this time he recalls that he also started to become interested in another new botany-related field, that of traditional herbal medicine. After nearly 11 years with the Wellcome Institute he retired in 1997 at the age of 65.

David joined the Botanical Society of the British Isles as a teenager in 1949 and was the second longest serving member (74 years) when he died in 2023. He was elected to Council in 1953, aged only 21, and later served as Honorary General Secretary from 1967 to 1969 and President from 1985 to 1987. He also served as Chairman of the Records Committee in the 1980s. He was made an Honorary Member in 1994 and a Vice-county Recorder Emeritus in 2013. One of his earliest botanical papers ‘The history of the vasculum’ was published in the *Proceedings* of the Society in 1959 and whilst serving as President he published the official account of the Society in *The Botanists: a History of the Botanical Society of the British Isles Through 150 Years* (1986). Unsurprisingly, he took on several referee and specialist contact roles related to his subjects of interest, including ‘Biographical details of British botanists’, ‘Herbaria’, ‘Medicinal uses of British plants’ and ‘infraspecific taxa of British phanerogams’. One of his early interests was the taxonomy of the *Cardamine pratensis* complex. He was never a referee for *Rubus*, presumably because by the time he considered himself expert in the group, it was already well covered by other batologists.

Shortly after joining the BSBI David attended the week-long field meeting to the Isle of Man in June



Three of David Allen's well-known books: *The Naturalist in Britain* (1976); *Flora of the Isle of Man* (1984) and *Books and Naturalists* (2010).

1950 and took on the task of keeping the records. In the *Flora of the Isle of Man* he recounts a few details of the meeting, including meeting several of the 'elite of British botany' at the time, including two well known figures from Kew. He doesn't say whether he was the one that had suggested holding a meeting there, but this seems quite likely considering his keen interest in the flora of the island.

During the two years away from employment he had also started work on two more books focusing on social history. The first was *The Victorian Fern Craze; a History of Pteridomania* (1969), which in a later article he explains was originally intended to be a paper for the *British Fern Gazette*, but due to a 'plethora of material' was published as a short book. The other was *The Naturalist in Britain, a Social History* (1976), of which David was particularly proud and which is probably his most widely known work. It was printed in several editions and languages, including Japanese and Chinese, which David was particularly amazed by. In 'My brilliant career' he explained that 'although History as an academic subject had passed me by at university, I had discovered a taste for it at school and during my second year at Cambridge the chance loan of the script of an old lecture by one of the Botany staff had fired me with the idea of writing a book on the social development of natural history, partly as a way of reconciling my passion

for field botany with the social anthropology with which I was currently attempting to grapple'.

David's interests in botany and social history were also combined during the writing of two other important books: *British & Irish Herbaria* (1984) with D.H. Kent and most recently, *Books and Naturalists* (2010) in the Collins New Naturalists series. He also co-authored *Medicinal Plants in Folk Tradition: an Ethnobotany of Britain & Ireland* (2004).

The Naturalist in Britain paved the way to him gaining election to the Council of the British Society for the History of Science (1978–81), to take on the Presidency of the Society for the History of Natural History (1977–80) and becoming a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. He was a long-time supporter of the British Records Association (who promote the preservation and study of British archival heritage), where he served on Council and as the Chair of the General Purposes Committee. He was also active in several other societies, including the Market Research Society, the Royal Statistical Society and the Economic History Society. He was also much in demand as a speaker at seminars and conferences, including several held overseas. He was awarded a PhD (through submission of publications) in the History and Philosophy of Science by the University of Cambridge in 1988 and an honorary doctorate by the University of Essex in 1995 for his

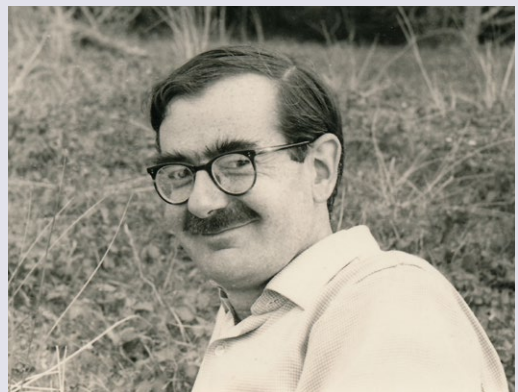
work on the data archive. His research into British naturalists was written up as numerous papers, many of which were published in the *Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History* (later *Archives of Natural History*), and in 2004 he published a collection of his most important works as *Naturalists and Society: The Culture of Natural History in Britain, 1700–1900*.

David's interest in brambles probably began during his early investigation of the Isle of Man flora. His first of many papers on brambles published in *Watsonia* was 'Irish and Welsh species of *Rubus fruticosus* L. agg. in the Isle of Man' (1974), although the first time he mentions collecting brambles was during a week's trip to southern Ireland in 1961 where he collected 34 specimens and 'put names to one or two with reasonable confidence'. However, it was not until 1973, a year after moving to Hampshire, that he started recording and researching the group in earnest. In addition to his field notebooks he maintained a set of species index cards with notes on herbarium specimens and described all his unidentified collections in a series of notebooks, assigning them 'H-numbers', which reached 1,448 before his death. Many of these specimens were duplicates or were eventually matched up to named species but over time he became familiar with several widely distributed unnamed entities which he gave nicknames, some of which were later published as new species in *Watsonia*. In total he published names and descriptions for 12 new *Rubus* species in the British flora and three more jointly with other authors. The first, H288, was appropriately named *Rubus hantonensis*, which David published in 1985 and which made it into the Addenda and Corrigenda section of Eedes & Newton's *Brambles of the British Isles* (1988). His *Watsonia* papers include remarkably detailed background accounts into the (often very confusing) taxonomy and naming of *Rubus* species and are testament to the enormous amount of time and effort he put in to track down specimens mentioned in the literature and look through boxes of 'indet' material in the hope of finding a match to something he had collected.

David did not drive a car, so in pursuit of his interest in *Rubus* in Hampshire, he travelled to almost

every woodland, common and heathland area of the county by train, bus and on foot. One of his favourite localities was Southampton Common, a 150-hectare area of woodland and parkland of medieval origin lying to the north of the city. He led a BSBI meeting there in the hot, dry summer of 1976 and in his report in *Watsonia* (Vol. 12, 1978) he light-heartedly compared the effects of the heat during the preceding week which 'had resulted in all but a few of the brambles being deprived of their petals' with the 'ferocious heat' on the day, which 'induced mass wilting on the part of the 11 members who attended'. His Southampton Common list numbers around 60 named species (of c.360 in Britain and Ireland), plus several hybrids and unnamed H-numbers, so the area is undoubtedly one of the best recorded and richest *Rubus* sites in Britain. His account of the Hampshire *Rubus* flora appeared in *The Flora of Hampshire* (1996), when it numbered around 137 named species (43% of the British flora at that time) and 50 or so of the more widespread H-numbers.

For a man in his seventies (when I first started brambling with him) David was extremely fit and active. Eric Clement and I visited him in Winchester in July 2008 for a whistle-stop tour of the city, which is built over several hills. We ended the day by climbing one of the highest and steepest ones and it was several days before our legs recovered. On bramble trips David traditionally brought along a sandwich for lunch, washed down with a small bottle



David Allen, September 1976.

of lager; however, he was not averse to visiting a tea shop for a pot of Earl Grey and a slice of cake.

In later years he joined forces with various car-owning botanists to make visits to the adjacent counties of the Isle of Wight, Dorset, West Sussex and Surrey, often with the purpose of compiling annotated lists for publication in county floras. Trips farther afield included week long bramble forays in Mid Wales with Arthur Chater (from 1994 to 2003) and visits to the Channel Islands and the Isles of Scilly to further his interest in the *Rubus* floras of islands. In addition, he made regular visits to the Normandy area of France, hunting for ‘cross-channel’ species. Since bramble recording is only really possible during the summer flowering period of June and July, recording trips to many of these locations were often conveniently taken as ‘holidays’ with Clare. Brambles encountered during these trips were written up *Watsonia* articles, including five relating to northern France.

Whilst President of the BSBI in 1986 David was invited over to Ireland to attend the centenary celebrations of the Dublin Naturalists’ Field Club, and although too early in the season to record brambles, this led to a further invitation to study *Rubus* for a Flora of County Dublin and the start of a long friendship with Declan Doogue. David ended up making regular, almost annual summer visits to Ireland, organised with help from Declan and other enthusiastic recorders. Eventually he covered most of the Republic and parts of Northern Ireland and examined thousands of specimens sent to him in large batches at the end of each season. His last major work on *Rubus*, to be fittingly entitled *Allen’s Brambles of Ireland*, is to be published by the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in collaboration with the Field Club in the near future.

David went out bramble hunting at least every other day during June and July but spent the days between and most other months of the year visiting museums, libraries, herbaria and other institutions to carry out his research. Representative specimens of many of his H-numbers and the newly named species were deposited in the Natural History Museum herbarium and the Hampshire county

herbarium in Winchester. He did not keep his own *Rubus* herbarium, only a small reference collection of rarer species. Before depositing specimens he would send batches for checking and confirmation to Alan Newton, the leading authority on *Rubus* in Britain and Ireland until his death in 2016, who David highly regarded.

David Allen was undoubtedly one of the most important botanists and social historians of the 20th century. His public school and university education, followed by a career predominantly in data analysis and statistics, clearly helped instil a meticulous, methodological approach in the collection and collation of data, which turned out to be particularly important and well-suited for the study of brambles as well as his social history research. His long-term studies of *Rubus* in Britain, Ireland and northern France have considerably advanced the understanding of that group of ecologically important, though under-appreciated, plants.

In his later years David’s memory faded as a result of Alzheimer’s disease and he suffered ill-health from a shoulder injury and a fall which broke his wrist, but he soldiered on and continued his weekly herbarium visits to London and bramble trips, including his last visit to Ireland in 2017. He and Clare moved to a retirement village in Romsey in 2020, where they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in 2022. David died on 14 July 2023 and his funeral was held at a natural burial site in East Meon, Hampshire on 17 August. His family requested that donations in his memory be made to the Alzheimer’s Society.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to David’s wife, Clare and his niece, Amanda for providing information on his life and career and to Barbara Greenwood for details of her father’s early botanising visits with David on the Isle of Man. I would also like to thank Jenny Hunt, Rugby School Archives Manager and her colleagues for compiling information on his schooldays. An earlier version of this obituary was published in the newsletter of the Hampshire Flora Group.

John Norton