

DAVID WELCH (1939–2023)

David Welch was born in Preston, Lancashire on 31 December 1939, the elder of the two children of Gilbert, an accountant in local government, and Maggie, who was from a family of market gardeners in nearby Walton-le-dale. David's interest in botany began whilst a pupil at Hutton Grammar School, his first records in the BSBI's Distribution Database dating from 1955 when he was just 15 years old. David's formal education continued at Downing College, Cambridge, where he read Natural Sciences (1958–61) whilst engaging in various aspects of college life including singing in the College Choir and captaining the College Chess Team. The final year of his undergraduate studies focused on botany, sparking his interest and expertise in the genus *Myosotis*, for which he would become BSBI referee.

To fill the gap between school and university David took the initiative of writing to the then Nature Conservancy research station at Merlewood, Grange-over-Sands (which had opened in 1954), offering to assist with their fieldwork for the summer. As a result he was given an 18-week assignment at Moor House in upper Teesdale. There he started the work on moorland ecology which continued with vacation work and then with his appointment as resident botanist once he had completed his first degree, this post being made available following



David Welch at a *Saxifraga hirculus* (Marsh Saxifrage) site near the Buck of Cabrach, North Aberdeenshire, 5 August 2016. Muriel Welch

the tragic death of Ken Park who drowned in the River Tees.

David's first duties at Moor House included some humble but necessary tasks associated with running a high-altitude field station, such as feeding the transport horse and ensuring continuity of the meteorological readings. The latter was a particular challenge during the long winter of 1962–63, when provisions had to be brought in on foot through deep snow. Scientifically, David advanced understanding of the ecology of sheep-grazed upland grasslands, with a particular focus on *Juncus squarrosus* (Heath Rush), setting the tone for his later career with its recurring themes of plant ecology and plant-herbivore interactions. While at Moor House David obtained an MSc for his thesis *Studies in the autecology of Juncus squarrosus L.*, supervised by Professor David Valentine of Durham University. It was through his association with Durham University that David met his future wife, Muriel, then a young geography student at St Hild's College. David and Muriel were married on 7 July 1967 and together raised two sons, Stephen and Adrian.

After five years at Moor House, David was recruited to a new research station, the Nature Conservancy's Unit of Grouse and Moorland Ecology at Banchory. He started work there in January 1967 in the Range Ecology Group, his first project being to describe and map vegetation in Glen Feshie, and to estimate herbivore use there. David spent the remainder of his career at the successors of this research station. During his career, disruptions included a move from Blackhall to Hill of Brathens; the organisational transitions from the Nature Conservancy to the Natural Environment Research Council's Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE, 1973) and subsequently to the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH, 2000); and the fire of 1991 started by so-called animal rights activists which almost destroyed the card files containing all his plant records.

During his 33 years of employment at Banchory, David undertook research on a wide range of important issues, much of it collaborative, often collecting and analysing data from long-term studies he initiated. His nominal retirement in 2000 largely consisted of exchanging his salary for an occupational pension, as in his new role as Emeritus Fellow of CEH he continued both to collect data and to write papers

summarising his findings. His montane research included the effects of a ski fence corridor on Glas Maol, where changes in sheep movements and snow cover led to encroachment of grasses into the fragile sedge/moss heath of the plateau. David's longest running study, spanning 45 years, measured grazing impacts on the floristics of multiple upland moorland sites in North East Scotland. The impact of herbivores also featured in a project at Mar Lodge estate, in which he initially studied the impacts of Red Deer on heather moorland. However, following a change in ownership from private estate to National Trust for Scotland, he took the opportunity of switching emphasis to monitoring the early stages of pinewood regeneration. As a final example of his ITE/CEH work, he was part of a joint initiative, including zoologists and foresters, researching the ecology, impacts and management of deer in commercial forests. David's element outlasted all others, his measurements of browsing and bark stripping impacts by Red Deer on Sitka Spruce at Glenbranter in Argyll continuing for 35 years.

Interwoven with his work as a professional botanist were David's many voluntary activities for BSBI and the application of his knowledge to the cause of nature conservation. He was Vice-county Recorder for North Aberdeenshire from 1977, involving his young family in the search for species and specimens and allocating a part of his garden to a living collection of unusual willows. Of all the species present in the county, the population of *Saxifraga hirculus* (Marsh Saxifrage) near The Buck of Cabrach is of greatest national significance, and David monitored this and attempted to establish additional populations nearby. The expanded understanding of the flora of the county achieved as a result of David's efforts and expertise was encapsulated in his *Flora of North Aberdeenshire* (1993), which included many of his remarkable discoveries such as an isolated site for *Betula nana* (Dwarf Birch).

The *Flora* contains a thorough account of the critical genera *Taraxacum*, *Hieracium* and *Rubus*. Although he rather let the former lapse, he maintained an active interest in the latter two groups and came to specialise in brambles, taking over the mantle of

lead Scottish referee from George Ballantyne. Like many batologists, David kept a list of bushes he knew did not fit into the published taxonomy, and after linking several such plants together he described one as new to science. Given its distribution, his name of choice would have been '*Rubus angus-mearns*', but the hyphenation was frowned upon and so *Rubus longiflorus* it became.

When the recordership for Kincardineshire became vacant, David took this responsibility on in 1994 to ensure full coverage of the vice-counties of North East Scotland. Some time after I joined him as co-Recorder in 2018, we began working together to produce a county Rare Plant Register for which David applied his scholarly mindset to seek out widely scattered herbarium specimens which had yet to be incorporated within the BSBI database. He also answered the call when BSBI was asked to assist Scottish Natural Heritage undertake Site Condition Monitoring of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, producing reports that Jim McIntosh, then BSBI Scottish Officer, described as being detailed, incisive and thoughtful.

David was a great advocate for botany in North East Scotland. He succeeded Charles Gimingham as botanical member of the panel of experts advising Aberdeenshire Council on the selection of Local Nature Conservation Sites and on the defence of these sites when threatened by planning applications. And for nearly 30 years he led annual

botanical excursions for the Scottish Wildlife Trust, many of these being joint with BSBI, building a sense of community amongst regular attenders. As a result of his professional and voluntary activities, David received the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership's 2020 Award for Lifetime Achievement in Ecology, Conservation and Biodiversity, an accolade of which he was justifiably proud.

In addition to his professional and voluntary work on plants and ecology, David was very active in research on a wide range of other topics, much of it centred around the history of church music in North East Scotland. He produced a steady stream of articles on topics such as gallery singing, psalmodies and historic organs published by the West Gallery Music Association and the British Institute of Organ Studies. He was himself very involved in church music over many decades, singing tenor and assisting Muriel in her roles as organist and choir master, thereby repaying her assistance in his botanical fieldwork.

In his latter years David's mobility became progressively more restricted due to myositis, making him increasingly reliant on assistance to reach the field sites he remained determined to visit. He died in hospital on 16 May 2023 after a fall and subsequent complications.

I am very grateful to Stephen Welch and Dave Scott for their help in writing this obituary.

David Elston