

ELIZABETH JANE (LIZ) McDONNELL (1946–2022)

The Somerset botanist Elizabeth Jane McDonnell (née Rose), universally known as Liz, died on 30 October 2022 at the age of 76. It is impossible to convey the deep sense of sadness and loss that so many of us have felt, and we know that the grief still lingers for those who were closest to her. Liz was such a good friend to so many people, and probably each of us, in one way or another, has had to learn how to keep going while carrying a Liz-shaped hole inside us.

Liz was Somerset through and through. For much of her life she lived in or close to Wedmore, on the edge of the Somerset Levels. She was born on 20 May 1946 at Moor End Farm, Cocklake, the third of four children. Her father, Cuthbert, dabbled in farming but during and after the Second World War he cycled from Cocklake to Cheddar each week to catch the train to London and Chelmsford where he worked as an aeronautical engineer. Cuthbert had been born in Wookey Hole, and he and the family would make annual spring-time pilgrimages by pony and trap to Ebbor Gorge, to marvel at the primroses and bluebells. Another favourite family destination was Nyland Hill, between Wedmore and Cheddar – a place where, more than half a century

later, Liz would be thrilled to discover a tiny colony of *Gastridium ventricosum* (Nit-grass).

At Moor End, the Rose family had a large garden where they grew fruit and vegetables and kept chickens, ducks and geese. As a small child Liz learnt from her mother, Margaret, the names of many garden plants as well as a varied assortment of common hedgerow and wayside ‘weeds’. She attended primary school in Wedmore, then in 1957, Hugh Sexey’s Grammar School in nearby Blackford. Her strong artistic leanings were already apparent as a child, probably encouraged by her mother who was herself an enthusiastic artist and craftswoman. In 1963 Liz enrolled at the Somerset College of Art, Taunton, for a pre-Diploma year, before heading off to London to Hornsey College of Arts and Crafts (1964–67) where she studied for a Diploma in Art and Design. Here, her interest in spinning, weaving and dyeing was encouraged by the textile artist and inspirational teacher Marianne Straub.

Liz married Richard McDonnell in 1967, and they had two children, Shap and Katy. For two years from 1970 Liz had a part-time post at Basford College, Nottingham, where she taught weaving and dyeing, but she soon moved back to Somerset, living briefly in Butleigh before returning to her roots, first at ‘Dungeon Cottage’, Cocklake, then much later at ‘The Old Gas Works’ in Wedmore. Richard would become an archaeologist of considerable renown, while Liz – busy raising a family – began to explore her own growing interest in gardening and botany. Her sister wonders whether Liz’s enthusiasm for botany developed, in part, as a result of her interest in plant dyes; as does Richard, who notes that her early fondness for lichens, in particular, could have been spurred on by their usefulness in dyeing.



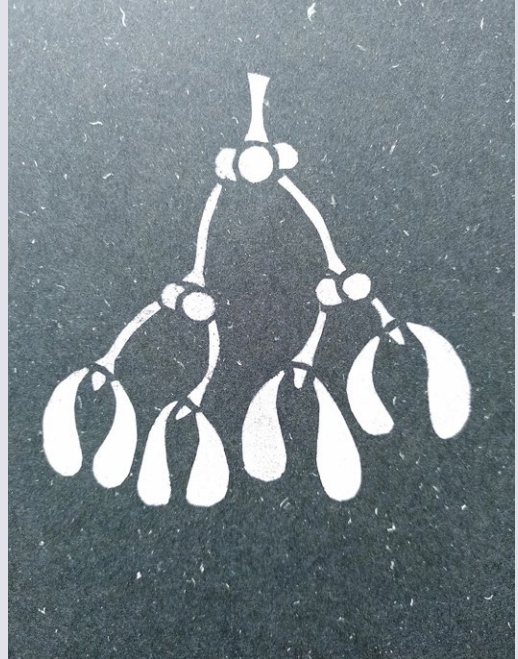
Liz McDonnell, in her van on the Somerset Levels, 2016. *Ro FitzGerald*

Liz joined the BSBI in 1978. As her interest in plants grew, so did her concern for their conservation. At some point in the late 1980s she became involved with the Somerset Environmental Records Centre, working either as a volunteer or on short-term and/or part-time contracts when it was based at Hestercombe, near Taunton. Liz joined Plantlife soon after it was formed in 1989 and it was the launch of its 'Back from the Brink' programme in 1991 that really opened up further employment opportunities for her. Between 1994 and 2000 she carried out detailed surveys of *Rumex rupestris* (Shore Dock) in Devon and Cornwall. She authored or co-authored a series of reports and papers on this species (e.g. Daniels et al., 1998; McDonnell & King, 2006) as well as the Red Data Book accounts for *R. rupestris* and *Hypericum linariifolium* (Toadflax-leaved St John's-wort) (Wigginton, 1999). She helped, too, with work on the Axbridge population of *Carex depauperata* (Starved Wood-sedge) at around this time.

In the early 1990s Liz also began to be employed on summer fieldwork contracts monitoring mainly grasslands within Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs), e.g. on Exmoor, the Blackdown Hills and the Somerset Levels. This work surely helped her in finally securing permanent employment in the early 2000s as an ecological adviser with the newly-established Rural Development Service, including a period 'on loan' to English Nature, and then latterly with Natural England until her retirement in 2010.

From the early 1980s onwards Liz became a familiar and friendly face at BSBI Annual Exhibition Meetings and field meetings. And she went on to lead a number of well-attended and very successful BSBI field meetings in Somerset. Her concerns about plant conservation led her to serve on the BSBI Conservation Committee from 1990 to 1996, and later, between 2000 and 2007, on Records Committee. In 1997 she was appointed by BSBI to coordinate the Society's contribution to the Millennium Seed Bank Project.

Also in 1997, Liz was instrumental in the establishment of the Somerset Rare Plants Group (SRPG). By then she had already contributed many plant records to *The Atlas Flora of Somerset* (1997),



One of Liz McDonnell's homemade Christmas cards (2020). Simon Leach

but she felt there was a need for repeat surveys and monitoring of rare plants in the county, as well as square-bashing in under-recorded areas for the BSBI's 'Atlas 2000' project. She was the first to advocate the production of a Somerset 'Red Data Book' or Rare Plants Register, and this new group, she imagined, would provide exactly the sort of information that such a publication would require. Over the years the SRPG has gone from strength to strength, with Liz very much at its helm. With Steve Parker as chair, she acted as the group's 'coordinator' for many years and edited its annual newsletter between 2013 and 2017.

Perhaps surprisingly, it wasn't until 2015 that Liz became a Vice-county Recorder, assisting Helena Crouch in North Somerset (v.c. 6). Yet across a span of more than 30 years her contribution to botanical recording in Somerset was immense. Delve into the Somerset MapMate database, and you'll discover her name attached to more than 125,000 records. She must have led or co-led at least a hundred SRPG field meetings, as well as arranging numerous

training days and workshops on difficult groups. Liz was a skilled teacher: perhaps the fact that her botany was largely self-taught gave her an instinctive ability to explain things in simple terms. She was a very 'visual' person, and when identifying plants in the field she'd often see useful characters that others might miss. Sometimes, when explaining floral or fruiting structures, like a magician she would produce handmade props constructed from felt and cardboard – just one of many instances where her botany and her passion for arts and crafts worked hand in glove. Beginners would tend to gravitate towards her as they knew that she would be happy to spend time going over the reasons why a plant might be 'x' rather than 'y'. Nothing seemed to be too much trouble, and her enthusiasm was infectious.

Liz supported other local groups, too, such as the Somerset Botany Group and Mendip Flora Group, she led wild flower walks for Mendip AONB, and for SRPG she organised targeted surveys of scarce or under-recorded species such as *Ophioglossum vulgatum* (Adder's-tongue Fern), *Spiranthes spiralis* (Autumn Lady's-tresses) and *Lathraea squamaria* (Toothwort). All this, plus a whole host of other interests and activities – the 'Green Wedmore' group, repair cafes, her allotment, Wedmore Arts Festival, drawing and painting and making things, producing her own greetings cards – as well as precious time spent with family and friends and trips abroad, to places like Sweden, Poland and Iceland.

Liz was always keen on pressed plants, and this was clearly another point of convergence between her twin passions, since a carefully pressed herbarium specimen was, for Liz, both a scientific document and a work of art. The herbarium in the Somerset County Museum in Taunton (TTN) was of particular interest to her, containing, as it did, thousands of specimens collected within the county – many of them, as she soon realised, of considerable scientific and historical value. Yet the collection was uncurated and in a poor state of repair; many of the sheets stored 'loose' in cardboard boxes or in bundles tied together with string. So, with the development of the Castle Museum and the removal of the natural history collections – herbarium

included – to a new out-of-town facility, Liz seized the opportunity, pulling together a small team of herbarium volunteers and hatching a plan with the then natural history curator, Dennis Parsons. Work began in the spring of 2015 to check on condition of the specimens, to photograph the sheets for eventual uploading to the Herbaria@Home website and then to arrange the collection in 'Stace 3' order before rehousing them in purpose-built cupboards inherited from the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

The herbarium project, as originally envisaged, was completed by spring 2017 (McDonnell & Salmon, 2017). But there was now the question of finding a home for the hundred or more *Taraxacum* (Dandelion) specimens collected during a BSBI training weekend. This opened the gates to a steady stream of new material: not just dandelions, for which TTN now holds over 700 specimens of more than 170 species, but also many other difficult groups such as hawkweeds, willows, rock sea-lavenders, knotgrasses, whitebeams and eyebrights. Thanks in large part to Liz's persistence and energy – and zeal – the herbarium that had been lying dormant a decade earlier was now very much alive and kicking.

And then the pandemic struck. In the months before the first lockdown in March 2020, Liz boxed up and put the finishing touches to a collection of her own specimens that she then donated to the herbarium. There were a few odds and ends still to be worked on, which she would tackle later, at home, during lockdown. For two years the natural history collections were closed due to the pandemic. By the time they reopened, in the spring of 2022, Liz was already unwell, and would soon be diagnosed with lung cancer. With treatment underway, though, she remained hopeful that once she felt better she'd be able to pick up where she'd left off two years earlier. Very sadly, that wasn't to be. And it was almost a year after Liz's death that those last sheets of specimens – the ones she'd been working on during lockdown – finally joined the rest of the collection that she had given to the herbarium in 2019.

What, we wonder, would Liz most like to be remembered for? Would it be her discovery of *Carex filiformis* (Downy-fruited Sedge) on Cheddar Moor

in 2003, very much on her home patch, and the only modern record in Somerset of this rare and threatened species? Or maybe the *Agrostis curtisii* (Bristle Bent) that she spotted on Black Down, Mendip, in 2008 – a first record and sole locality for this species in v.c. 6? Or the *Fallopia dumetorum* (Copse Bindweed), found with her good friend Clive Lovatt near Nailsea in 2016, the second record for Somerset, the only previous one having been in 1836? Or what about the first record in Britain of the North American *Juncus polycephalus* (Manyhead Rush), found at Steart Marshes in 2014?

Or maybe it wouldn't be the records at all, but instead just the sense of companionship, and memories of long days spent happily in the field in the warm embrace of friends. And a flask of coffee, and a slice of homemade cake, and a joke or two.

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