

MICHAEL JAMES YATES FOLEY MBE, PhD (1935–2022)

I first met Michael by chance in August 1985 at Sandscale Haws in south-west Cumbria. We had a long and, for me, informative conversation during which he promised to show me *Orchis morio* (as it then was) at several south Cumbrian sites the following spring. That second meeting in May 1986 was wholly successful and was the first of many over the next 35 years, encompassing visits to all parts of Britain, shortly followed by trips to Ireland, Gotland, Crete, Cyprus, the Peloponnese, Spain, Switzerland and France. Initially, orchids were our main target but

Michael had a wide and constantly evolving range of botanical enthusiasms and interests and, as the years went by, salvias, broomrapes, horsetails, sedges and violas were added to our list with birds and butterflies and, latterly, other insects playing an increasingly important role. What never failed to amaze me was the way Michael always seemed to know exactly the places to go to see the various species we were looking for. In the wilds of the Peloponnese, he might say, ‘We need to park here and walk up this little valley and then, over the top there should be ...’.



Michael Foley after receiving his MBE, 2003.

And there was! I soon realised this was due to a wide range of contacts throughout Europe, a phenomenal memory, meticulous planning and, above all, a feel for where a particular plant would grow.

Michael (often Mike to his friends) was born on 15 December 1935, the only child of Harriet (née Yates) and Robert Foley, a cotton mill manager. For the first years of his life the family lived in Darwen, Lancashire before moving a short distance to 87 Ribchester Road, Clayton-le-Dale in September 1939, the house where Michael was to live until his death in 2022. He attended Clitheroe Royal Grammar School, obtaining A-levels in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry and playing both association football and cricket for the school first teams. He was called for Lancashire youth team cricket trials as an off-spinner but was not selected. He obtained a BSc Tech. in Chemistry at the University of Manchester and an MSc Tech. in Organic Chemistry (with a thesis on steric inhibition of mesomerism) in 1960. He was a keen walker and mountaineer, on one occasion completing half the Cuillin ridge by himself after his companion decided that the task was too challenging. After university, he was employed at Crown Paints as a research and

development chemist until he was made redundant in 1988. Following a short period of work as an ecological consultant, Michael began a PhD at the University of Lancaster on the taxonomy of some European species of *Orobanche*. This was successfully completed in 1998. Before this date Michael had produced several academic papers on botanical matters but he subsequently wrote many more (30 in total) on subjects as diverse as *Salvia veneris* in Cyprus, *Orobanche* on the Arabian Peninsula and *Spiranthes aestivalis* in north-west Europe. He also wrote articles on little-appreciated British botanists and a paper on Christopher Merrett's *Pinax rerum naturalium britannicarum* (Foley, 2006). Shortly after gaining his PhD he carried out work in conjunction with Ian Hedge of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh and became an associate of the Garden. He wrote the text for *Orchids of the British Isles* (Foley & Clarke, 2005), was joint author of two BSBI Handbooks, *Sedges of the British Isles* (Jermy et al., 2007) and *Violas of Britain and Ireland* (Porter & Foley, 2017) and contributed substantial items on *Orobanche* to *Flora Iberica* and the *Flora of Nepal*. Whilst maintaining the highest scientific and academic standards, Michael had the happy knack of writing interestingly and his work is always highly readable. He was also able to back up his investigations with photographs, as he was a skilled and imaginative photographer. During this period of his life he travelled widely and frequently in Britain and Europe, sometimes alone, sometimes with Ruth and Trevor Pearce (including two visits to Svalbard), sometimes with me, in pursuit of plants. His trips were not for the faint-hearted! I remember on more than one occasion driving to the Scottish Highlands, climbing a substantial hill, collecting details of a sedge, going back down the hill and then driving home – 600 miles, and a moderate climb, all in one day. Or I might get a phone call one evening 'Do you fancy a trip to France to look at *Spiranthes aestivalis* – on Friday? If we sleep in the car and don't hang around we can manage it in two days'.

Though Michael will be remembered by many botanists for his exceptional contributions to botanical knowledge, he had many other interests, chief among which was cricket and the coaching of

young cricketers. He devoted much of his life to this, being awarded an MBE for services to sport in 2003. One of the many young cricketers he had coached later said of him ‘One thing that really stood out about him was that he wasn’t just interested in the good players. He wanted everyone to do well’.

Michael’s many other interests were mainly in the field of natural history and were wide-ranging – hares, waxcaps, birds, butterflies, bees and orthopterans. As with his botanical interests, he was a great communicator, administering several Facebook sites and writing local guides to the insects of north-west England, as well as a short volume of poetry *Forsinard and Other Memories* in 2019. In all these fields and in others new to him he rapidly gained a high level of knowledge, testimony to a quick and retentive brain and an ability to assimilate and synthesise information. He retained these qualities to the end of his life and, even when health problems had greatly reduced his mobility, he never lost his enthusiasm for wildlife and for getting out in the field – only days before his death, he was making plans to re-visit a site for *Neotinea ustulata* in Wensleydale and

even arranging a trip by plane to the Outer Hebrides to see the Great Yellow Bumblebee. Michael died, from heart failure, on 21 February 2022.

Michael wore his scholarship lightly, never forcing his views on others and always at pains to ensure that the opinions of fellow enthusiasts were taken into account. His great number of friends in Britain and Europe, in various fields of activity, are a testament to his warmth, his enthusiasm and his readiness to share his knowledge – he will be greatly missed.

References

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