

## CHARLES GORDON HANSON (1938–2021)

Gordon (as he was always known) Hanson's name may not be familiar to many present-day botanists, but his passion for and commitment to studying the nature and origins of our alien flora has made huge contributions both regionally and nationally. In later years his attendance at indoor and field meetings was constrained by prolonged bouts of ill health, with the result that few local contemporaries had the chance to interact with him personally. However, the number of records for exotic and introduced species attributed to Gordon in successive Floras of Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, alongside his research papers and a vast amount of herbarium material, is ample testimony to his achievements, enthusiasm and expertise.

Gordon was born on 7 September 1938 at Langley near Slough and grew up in that area,



Gordon Hanson in his garden of alien plants, Ware, Hertfordshire, September 2017. *June Crew*

obtaining a scholarship to Slough Grammar School. At school he developed a reputation as something of a prankster, but secondary education must also have helped to develop the passions and rigour that characterised both his subsequent professional and amateur careers. He served briefly as a laboratory assistant at the renowned Fulmer Research Institute before embarking on a part-time three-year HND physics course at Kingston Polytechnic. Having then obtained a teaching certificate at Huddersfield Polytechnic, he was appointed in 1964 to a lecturership in physics and engineering at the Mid-Herts College of Further Education in Welwyn Garden City. His lectures were reputedly rather unorthodox and hands-on, involving such props as sledgehammers and drain covers, but no doubt very memorable as a consequence. He also produced a physics textbook to accompany his teaching (Hanson, 1971). Gordon married Jill at her home town of Norwich in 1960, and they had a son Andrew and daughter Philippa, born in 1964 and 1966, respectively. In 1966 the Hansons moved to a house in Coltsfoot Road, Ware, where Gordon and Jill lived ever since.

Aside from his day job, Gordon had many consuming passions including music (he sang with the Ware Choral Society), railway history, Meccano (an enthusiasm nurtured in childhood that prevailed though his adult life) and gardening. The garden at Coltsfoot Road acquired widespread fame for its collections of plants obtained on overseas holidays, cultivated from bird seed (see below), or encompassing specialised taxonomic groups. As an example of the latter, his assemblage of *Cotoneaster* species proved a valued resource for Peter Sell when producing descriptions of flowers and fruits for Volume 2 of Sell & Murrell's *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*.

Gordon's passion for alien plants was absorbing and infectious. June Crew, a staff colleague at the Mid Herts College and a fellow naturalist, recalls his talks on this subject to the Cheshunt Natural History Society where he circulated specimens from such exotic genera as *Amaranthus*, *Datura* and *Nicandra*. His associated field meetings focused on

alluring habitats such as sewage works and rubbish tips, and most excitedly also included fields in south Bedfordshire where farmers had incorporated, as soil fertiliser, shoddy from sheep fleeces imported from Australasia and South America. Some of the material collected on these forays was cultivated for further inspection in greenhouses at the University of Hertfordshire's (then Hatfield Polytechnic's) field station at Bayfordbury, a site that itself has generated some interesting botanical discoveries. In its disused glasshouses, Gordon found a mystery species of *Solanum* that became increasingly frequent as the glasshouses became increasingly derelict, and has since even spread outdoors. This plant was assigned a number of incorrect names until Sandy Knapp at the Natural History Museum diagnosed it as *Solanum chacoense*. This is a South American species only ever recorded in Europe in the vicinity of research institutes involved in potato improvement and utilising *S. chacoense* as a source of resistance to potato blight. Mystery solved: before it was acquired by Hatfield Polytechnic, Bayfordbury was the site of the original John Innes Institute, which at the time was undertaking work on potato breeding!

Perhaps his most significant botanical contribution and enduring legacy was painstaking research on the occurrence of alien plants originating from seed sold for wild and caged birds, based both on documenting the presence of such plants in the 'wild' as well as cultivating material from commercial seed mixes. Gordon's son Andrew recalls 'ah yes, the bird seed! I recall being trained from an early age to sort through packets of the stuff, and remember being particularly impressed to be told I'd found seed of *Cannabis sativa*'. A landmark paper in *Watsonia* (Hanson & Mason, 1985) presented a list of 425 species believed to have been imported by this means, of which 318 had actually been cultivated by the authors from birdseed mixtures. A follow-up paper (Hanson, 2000) added a further 44 taxa to the list. As editor of BSBI's new online journal *British & Irish Botany*, one of us (ID) had the pleasure of working with Gordon on a further paper (Hanson, 2019) dealing specifically with plants originating as impurities in batches of Niger (*Guizotia abyssinica*)

seed imported as wild bird food from Ethiopia and south Asia. The paper includes the (no doubt) considerable understatement ‘sorting through 1kg packets of Niger seed with a hand lens and tweezers to separate out the impurities is a laborious task but is necessary because the product is normally well over 99% pure’! The obscurity of many species retrieved and cultivated required expert assistance with identification provided by one of the current authors (EJC) among others. This paper is also notable for including images of specimens from Gordon’s herbarium that leave no doubt about the great care taken in their preparation.

Material collected and preserved by Gordon is held at the Natural History Museum, National Museum of Wales, University of Reading, North Herts Museum and the personal herbarium of Eric

Clement. Material remaining at Ware following Gordon’s death on 13 December 2021 has been transferred to the Bayfordbury campus for sorting and eventual rehousing. In its entirety this material represents an astonishing legacy of what was a purely amateur pursuit.

### References

- Hanson, G. 1971. *Problems and Examples in Physics for O.N.C./O.N.D.* McGraw Hill, Maidenhead.
- Hanson, C.G. & Mason, J.L. 1985. Bird seed aliens in Britain. *Watsonia* 15: 237–252.
- Hanson, C.G. 2000. Update on birdseed aliens (1985–1998). *Watsonia* 23: 213–220.
- Hanson, C.G. 2019. Birdseed aliens originating from Niger (*Guizotia abyssinica*) wild bird food. *British & Irish Botany* 1: 292–308.

---

Ian Denholm and Eric J. Clement