

Alfred William Jones ('Wilberforce') (1929-2014)

My father was born on 19th September 1929, at 1 Elliott Road, Chiswick, then in Middlesex, now part of Greater London. He rarely spoke of his early life, but it was simple, frugal, sometimes very difficult. His mother, Henriette Lucy Luxton, came to London from Rotherham, aged just 14, to join her older sister in domestic service. Later she met and married Reginald Bernard Jones, a jobbing blacksmith who, fallen on hard times during the slump, took whatever work he could. In March 1934, 'Bernard' was acting as caretaker on a large houseboat on the Thames, opposite Hampton Court Palace, when he fell into the water. My father, aged just 4½, raised the alarm; "Daddy's in the water" he remembered saying. But Bernard drowned and was buried two days later, on the day Alfred's sister was born.

It seems inconceivable, now, trying to imagine what it must have been like for a single mother bringing up two young children, on her own, on the eve of the Second World War. The government widow's pension of 18 shillings a week, supplemented with office cleaning jobs, at least kept them off the streets. Apparently they moved about a lot, often living together, the three of them, in a single rented room. Despite this harsh life, a latch-key kid from the age of 6, my father remembered his early years fondly and there is no doubt that they made him very independent and self-sufficient.

I do not think Dad ever really knew where his interest in natural history came from. He recalled moth caterpillars in the hedgerows of West London, particularly when he walked his early morning paper round. There was an aquarium with dragonfly nymphs in one of his school classrooms. He noticed bumblebees and a Mole Cricket when he was evacuated to Yorkshire during the Blitz and water beetles in the emergency fire-fighting ponds dug along the local streams in case of incendiary attacks.

In 1944 he won a scholarship to St Marylebone Grammar School in Paddington, but meagre family finances meant that he had to leave after only two years, to join a firm of accountants. He did, however, continue studying and attended the Regent Street Polytechnic to pass matriculation for London University, although he never entered the university.

His first notebooks were from this time, though they are lost. However, for Christmas 1946 his mother gave him an 'all-weather' notebook, and from this first nature diary (which still survives) to the day of his death he never stopped writing.

Although his earliest interests were in insects, particularly butterflies, moths, hoverflies and bumblebees, he was hampered by lack of a microscope and identification guides. With plants, however, he was able to make better progress. He borrowed whatever was to be found in Paddington Library, and by 1946 had acquired a good working knowledge of at least the common plants of Wimbledon Common, Richmond Park, Putney Heath, Hampstead Heath and the bombed sites of the City of London, his local patches.

In 1951 he wrote to dipterist Leonard Parmenter, who introduced him to the London Natural History Society's Bookham Common survey team. He soon became a regular there, and his first published paper was on the flora of Bookham Common, in the *London Naturalist* (1954). Over the next ten years he wrote several short articles on plants, hoverflies and butterflies. Dad always carried an insect net, so people who met him always first assumed that he was a straight entomologist, but by this time he had quite firmly pinned his colours to the mast of botany. The large ovoid metal tin, painted leaf green, attached under the flap of his backpack perplexed some of my school friends, who assumed it must be some sort of scuba-diving equipment, since they did not recognise a vasculum when they saw one.

One of the seminal moments came on his 21st birthday, in 1950, when he bought Sowerby's *English Botany*, the Roxburgh reissue of the 3rd edition (1902), for the then immense sum of £25, his mother contributing £5 as a birthday present. He now made huge strides in plant identification and I remember him using the book regularly when I was a youngster. Anyone who owns this particular series of volumes will know that its gutta percha binding is apt to become brittle and corrupt, so that opening up the book scatters loose pages everywhere. Several years ago, not wanting to give up on one of his favourite botanical works, my father had the entire set re-bound.

Incidentally, it was around this time, perhaps in the mid 1950s, that my father acquired his confusing nickname. Visiting the home of fellow naturalist George F. Lawrence in Balham, my father had George's young son Antony on his knee. The small hands were clutching at Dad's fingers and the chunky gold signet ring he always wore on his right hand — it was engraved with his initials AWJ. The boy asked what the W stood for, but quick as a flash, before Dad could answer, Mrs Lawrence jokingly piped up "Wilberforce". It stuck, and many people knew him by no other name.

The late 1950s were a busy and changing time. He met and married Rosamond Helen Stevens in 1957, we children followed from 1958, then the firm of accountants he worked for relocated to Lewes in Sussex, so in 1965 the family moved to Newhaven. This diluted or ended social links with the many naturalists he knew in London and Surrey, but offered instead the unending vista of the Sussex countryside. Our house was at the foot of the South Downs, only scores of yards from the grazing meadows of the Ouse Valley, and less than half a mile from the sea. After living almost his entire early life in the urban confines of west, then south London, there was no holding him back.

Over the next 50 years he set about crossing and re-crossing virtually every square metre of the county, and wherever he went he wrote down what he saw. There were a few insect

observations, but in effect this really meant long lists of plants from every part of the county. He filled in excess of 1500 rough field notebooks with an illegible scrawl that only he could read, but every autumn and winter, or in the evenings, he meticulously transcribed the records into the neat species tables and notebooks for the various survey areas on which he was working.

Before he owned a car our family weekends between 1st March and 1st October were Sussex-based rambles selected according to local bus and train timetables. These dictated which blocks of the county he could usefully traipse across (and trespass through). I grew up thinking it was perfectly natural to spend every sun-lit hour squelching across the marshy meadows of the Sussex river valleys, scrambling up the stepped sheep-rutted scarps of the chalk beacon hills, and pushing through the dense woods and copses of the Weald; then to sit down at a desk in the evening to pin insects onto setting boards, or fair-copy write-up my own nature notes.

Using a complex code of symbols to denote his adapted version of the DAFOR scale, and a different colour ink for each year, he would eventually build up a detailed appraisal of each area's plant species, their relative abundance or rarity, habitat associations and history, and after about 7-10 years he would 'close' the survey by writing it up as a discrete local flora.

As time progressed a car made ever more distant areas accessible, and when he retired in 1990, he would spend over 200 days of the year out in the field, clocking up 15,000 miles a year. His surveyed blocks eventually came to cover almost the entire county and he had recently taken to visiting the narrow interstices of remaining land left in between them, mostly urban areas, urban fringes and some difficult footpath-free private estates. Trespassing came naturally to Dad, and many a time I have been out with him, skulking through the woods, when we would meet the gamekeeper, shotgun in hand, or the local landowner on horseback. We were rarely ever turned away. Instead my father would welcome them with raised hand and a greeting

of “tally-ho”. Even he probably knew this was slightly eccentric, but he was always well-dressed, with jacket and tie, and affably polite. Within minutes he would be earnestly discussing the local flora and fauna and almost without fail be offered an open invitation to visit the site again, any time he liked.

Annual holidays to the Isle of Wight, Purbeck, Lyme Regis and New Forest, together with forays into neighbouring Kent and Surrey (re-visiting some of the places from his youth) followed a similar pattern, but he never ventured further afield. He did not possess a passport, and never travelled abroad. This rather inward-looking frame of mind was completely typical of my father, ever modest and self-deprecating. He was not a rarity hunter, nor did he bash squares to drum up records for recording schemes. Instead he worked on his own, in his own time, to his own targets and deadlines, and for his own pleasure.

It was rather a joke with the family that Dad never used a computer, nor even a typewriter. He apparently had a reputation at work for sometimes refusing to answer the infernal telephone. The fountain pen was his instrument of choice, lately followed by roller-ball gel pens to give a smooth flow to his neat, elegant, looping handwriting. Dad was very much the old-school field naturalist, and although he wrote copiously, this was simply his way of preserving the data he recorded. Apart from those few early articles, he did not publish, nor did he intend to publish, his botanical work. After nearly 70 years of writing he leaves a truly monumental weight of over 600 large manuscript volumes — records, notes and completed local floras, all neatly inked and hand-bound. These have lately gone to the manuscript archive of the Botany Library of London’s Natural History Museum. His nine cabinets of insect specimens, cabinet of snail shells, and his herbar-

ium are now in the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton.

He often joked that he would need to be wheeled about in a Bath-chair to botanise in his dotage, but he was active to the end, and on 23rd May 2014, the day before he died suddenly, he was out exploring in the fields and meadows around Cuckfield, near Haywards Heath in his beloved Weald.

RICHARD A. JONES

List of published botanical papers:

- JONES, A.W. (1954). ‘The flora of Bookham Common’. *London Naturalist*, **33**: 25-47.
- JONES, A.W. (1955). ‘The flora of the golf course on Wimbledon Common’. *London Naturalist*, **34**: 141-145.
- CASTELL, C.P. & JONES, A.W. (1958). [Survey of Bookham Common]. ‘Notes on the vegetation of the Eastern Plain’. *London Naturalist*, **37**: 58-65.
- JONES, A.W. (1958). ‘The flora of the City of London bombed sites’. *London Naturalist*, **37**: 189-210.
- JONES, A.W. (1959). ‘The flora of Station Copse, Bookham Common’. *London Naturalist*, **38**: 61-63.
- JONES, A.W. (1960). ‘The aquatic and wasteland plants of Bookham Common’. *London Naturalist*, **39**: 76-89.
- JONES, A.W. (1961). ‘The vegetation of the South Norwood or Elmers End Sewage Works’. *London Naturalist*, **40**: 102-114.
- JONES, A.W. (1962). ‘The vegetation of Devilsden Wood and nearby downs, Coulsdon, Surrey’. *London Naturalist*, **41**: 77-86.
- JONES, A.W. (2008). ‘Bookham bomb craters’. In: BURGESS, M. (ed.) *London’s changing natural history: classic papers from 150 years of the London Natural History Society*. L.N.H.S., London. pp. 65-66.



A.W. Jones, on Banstead Heath, June 1956



A.W. Jones on his 80th birthday, September 2009
Photos courtesy R.A. Jones, photographers not recorded