

Edna Wyness Stewart (1932–2015)

Mrs Edna Stewart died on the 1st August 2015, two weeks short of her 83rd birthday. She was Vice-County Recorder for Stirlingshire (where she lived, in the southwest corner of the county at Milngavie) for almost 20 years from 1994 until 2013 and served on the BSBI Scottish Committee between 1998 to 2003 and again as Meeting Secretary from 2005 to 2008. Her appointment to the recordership was timely. Stirlingshire had hitherto been only patchily surveyed but within five years Edna was responsible for major improvements in our knowledge of the distribution of its flora, working with great commitment and enlisting helpers from local natural history groups as well as BSBI members to get the county onto a good footing for the *New Atlas*.

Edna was born in Kilmarnock on 13th August 1932. Her family moved to Dumfries when she was five and later, when she was in her teens, to Glasgow where she attended Bearsden Academy. She subsequently graduated from the University of Glasgow with a degree in botany and embarked on a career teaching biology. Her love of wild places and the outdoors was the driving force in Edna's life – a passion she shared with her late husband, John Stanley Stewart. A stalwart member of the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club, which she joined as a young woman, she spent her weekends mountaineering and hill walking (completing the Munros with her husband in 1987 to become Munroist 496). She was also a keen skier, mastering cross country skiing while living for a year in Norway and continuing with it until recent years. Holidays were serious adventures – canoeing around remote islands and coastlines in the collapsible wood-framed canvas craft she had acquired in Norway, for instance – and family members recall her strength and determination in completing these expeditions in sometimes arduous conditions (on one occasion becoming stormbound on a headland north of Gairloch

and having to portage canoes and gear over the hills to safer waters).

After Edna gave up teaching she was able to spend more time pursuing her love of plants through field botany. Although she was a trained botanist she does not appear to have kept formal field records until this period, and botanising with friends had provided succour in the years following the death of her husband. She joined the BSBI in 1989, becoming Recorder for Stirlingshire in 1994. When P.S. began helping in the vice county a few years ago she expressed a little regret that she had not done more botanical recording earlier in her life. (In fact the BSBI records database contains Scottish records of more than 1000 taxa in 17 counties associated with her name! There had always been many competing interests though, and not only skiing, canoeing and climbing; botanical lists in her notebooks would be interleaved with notes on theatre, opera, assorted ecological topics or the language and culture of whichever country she had been planning to visit at the time.) Edna's late appointment possibly acted as something of a spur. On taking on the vice-county in her 60s she certainly tackled the job of recording its flora with the dynamism and fitness of a lifelong outdoorswoman, enthusiastically walking the hills, cycling into forests and even exploring habitats which – to her – were less familiar and favourable, like the dockyards of the inner Firth of Forth. Her knowledge of the Scottish landscape and its plant life made her well suited to the role and she quickly amassed tens of thousands of records, surveying 126 tetrads across the county in the few years leading up to the *New Atlas*. She also led successful Stirlingshire BSBI field meetings in 1995 and 1998 which generated many notable records from Ben Lomond and the Fintry Hills (*BSBI News* 72: 58–59, 1996 and 80: 68–70, 1999) and enjoyed participating in many others (Colour Section Plate 4). Before retiring in 2013 she had made a similar impact on

recording in the current atlas period. It was a life she relished and she was a well-known and respected figure in several local natural history societies as well as sitting on the management committee of the local country park. Fellow members of the BSBI Scotland Committee have warm memories of her hospitality and baking when meetings were held in her home.

No great lover of computers, she did not enjoy MapMate but was nevertheless a relatively early adopter of the computerised system for maintaining the county records and diligently persevered in digitising records into her eighties. In common with some botanists of her generation she could be cagey about the detail of records she held and showed some ambivalence towards the mass flow of data – probably out of concern that information on rare species or sensitive sites might fall into the wrong hands. Though she wrote little about her findings, future students of Stirlingshire's flora will be in her debt. No person has contributed more records of vascular plants in the county and the fact that her main period of activity came on the heels of a shortfall in data and spanned the turn of a century means that her recording legacy will have lasting significance.

Although she had left teaching, it was fair to say that 'the teacher never left Edna'. Her ability to pass on botanical knowledge was valued on the walks she led for the Glasgow Natural History Society and other groups and the talks she gave about her overseas travels were much enjoyed (for 15 years she was a member of the Scottish Arctic Club and her vacation destinations – Greenland, Kamchatka etc. – were far from pedestrian). She took a pragmatic approach to teaching plant identification in the field – using habitat and 'jizz' characters as much as keys and taxonomic traits – which was effective in enthusing

beginners about plants. Many recorders and naturalists in the Glasgow area will have benefited from her tuition. Edna's direct, and sometimes slightly scolding, manner, though never meant with malice, could be deployed to withering effect – for instance when commenting on a management plan or forestry scheme that she considered likely to be injurious to the botanical diversity of a site.

As she reached her 70s walking and mountain climbing were curtailed by painful arthritis. Though she stoically bore this, eventually having hip surgery, her frustration at becoming increasingly limited to shorter distances and lower altitudes was clear. After retirement from recording Edna devoted much of her time to the delightful garden where she had successfully cultivated various choice plants from specimens sought out in larger gardens and collections. She remained very active up to the last few months of her life – still planning trips with friends though now centred on the arts rather than the outdoors.

Edna was an adventurous woman with a strong, independent nature who lived a very full life. She had varied interests, which were actively pursued, and consequently acquired friends from a range of backgrounds. Her company will be missed and warmly remembered not only by those in the natural history community but in many other circles. The BSBI is very grateful to the Stewart family for donating many of Edna's botanical books to support a new generation of botanists and recorders.

We are grateful to Alan Stewart and Gwynn Ellis for assistance in compiling this obituary.

PHILIP SANSUM & PAM MURDOCH



Edna Stewart (second from right) at a recording week based at Glenmore Lodge, August 2008. Also present, left to right, Brian Ballinger, Barbara Ballinger, Angus Hannah, Jeff Waddell, John Holland, Richard Pankhurst & Jackie Muscott. Photo © Jim McIntosh