

## Gillian Beckett (1935–2016)

Gillian Beckett (Colour Section Plate 1), who died on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2016, was an excellent and well-known local botanist, having been BSBI Vice-County Recorder for West Norfolk (v.c.28) for 23 years. She was also a woman with a wide range of interests in many other spheres, particularly in history, geography and natural history. She was author of *A Flora of Norfolk*, published in 1999, in conjunction with Alec Bull, Vice-County Recorder for East Norfolk (v.c.27) and Robin Stevenson, BBS Recorder for Norfolk. Gillian had a great talent for involving local people in botanical recording and training them to become good botanists, through encouragement, arranging regular field meetings, helping them to improve their skills, and all in a very friendly atmosphere. She, and her botanically knowledgeable husband Ken, who wrote many books on garden plants, trees and horticulture, made a formidable team.

Gillian was born Gillian Tuck on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1935 in Bromley, Kent, and moved with her father and mother to Stanhoe, Norfolk, in 1948, soon after her father was demobbed from the army. He then worked for a time at Bircham Newton nearby, in the Officers' Mess. Mr Tuck's family had originally come from the Wells area of Norfolk. Gillian's mother was shocked at the cottage they moved into, Bramley Cottage, and burst into tears the first time she saw it. The cottage had no electricity supply or mains water. These 'mod cons' didn't arrive until the early '50s. However, the family soon became involved in village life, and Gillian's mother, a talented pianist, set out to organise a pantomime that very year. Cinderella was the choice and Gillian starred as Cinderella. Apparently, from newspaper reports it was a great success with requests for performances in neighbouring villages. A year or two later, Beauty and the Beast was the choice.

Gillian was an only child. She developed an interest in natural history and remembered

counting the number of yellowhammer nests in a stretch of hedge and later contrasted it with how many fewer there are today. She went to Fakenham Grammar School after the family arrived in Stanhoe and after that to Teacher Training College. She started teaching at Docking primary school where occasionally, in severe freezing winters, the school would be closed because they had only outside toilets. Later on in her teaching career she became Deputy Head at the primary school in Wells. To improve her qualifications she took an external Honours degree in Geography, with a particular interest in Historical Geography and the Landscape.

John Pankhurst introduced Gillian to botany in the 1950s and she later learned a great deal from Eric Swann, who was Recorder for West Norfolk from 1949 to 1982. She joined the BSBI in 1961 and, under the name of Miss G. Tuck, contributed records to the *Flora of Norfolk* by C.P. Petch and E.L. Swann, published in 1968. For this publication she also provided many colour transparencies as illustrations.

Gillian was Meetings Secretary (later Field Secretary) for the BSBI from 1972 to 1976. In April 1973 she led a two-week meeting to Yugoslavia, which, according to Arthur Copping, who was one of the members of the party, was "very successful, but fraught with difficulties associated with a Communist state". During the meeting, three members (Ken Beckett, Arthur Copping and Eric Clement) decided to leave the group on the free day, and take the train from Dubrovnik to Trebinje in search of *Helleborus* species. This aroused suspicion among the authorities and the three were arrested and detained for some hours before being returned on the train to Dubrovnik. It was later disclosed that they were suspected of being Croatian nationalists! Apparently Gillian, who had to cope with all the consequences, let her displeasure be known to the trio. It was at this meeting that

Ken and Gillian first met, and they soon married, in August.

After their marriage Gillian joined Ken in Essex where he was working as technical editor for the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, and Gillian worked as his assistant. Soon after, there came an opportunity to buy the other half of the attached cottage in Stanhoe. Ken took the opportunity, and Gillian and Ken returned with their young son, Keith, to Bramley Cottage in 1976. Whilst back in Norfolk, apart from looking after Keith, she would regularly lecture for WEA courses in subjects that interested her: for instance in 1981, there was a course on 'East Anglia', covering history, geography, geology, buildings, archaeology, landscapes and habitats. She was a talented and interesting teacher and her courses were very popular and fully illustrated by her photographic slides. Another WEA course she gave was on 'Norfolk Natural History', covering different habitats.

Photography – pre-digital – was, obviously, another of her skills. Gillian and Ken ran a picture library for many years, specialising in plants both wild and cultivated. She worked with Ken on some of his many horticultural books, providing numerous photographs and sometimes typing the manuscript. In 1979 *Planting native trees and shrubs*, by Kenneth and Gillian Beckett was published by Jarrolds of Norwich. "Ken and Gillian have jointly borne the bulk of the work, with enthusiasm and tenacity" is a quotation from the Foreword.

She also regularly led field meetings in Norfolk, looking at plants, as part of WEA courses, and also for the local Norfolk Naturalists Trust (now Norfolk Wildlife Trust), for the Heacham and West Norfolk Natural History Society and for the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society. These were the meetings where many started their botanical interests, and the patience she, with Ken, showed to beginners was to pay off when collecting together a group of recorders for *A Flora of Norfolk* (1999).

In 1988 Gillian was appointed Vice-County Recorder for West Norfolk, with Ken as co-Recorder. She followed Charles Petch who

had been Recorder from 1982 to 1988. Gillian was a very well-organised person and kept meticulous and detailed records. She was also Recorder through the time when records were transferred to computer, to which she adapted readily (if not enthusiastically – the early inputting programmes for records being fiendishly difficult). Already in 1987 she began the project informally to produce a Flora of West Norfolk, after the end of the BSBI's Monitoring Scheme in 1987/88. The results of the Scheme made it obvious how much the county's flora had changed since Petch and Swann's *Flora of Norfolk* of 1968. Alec Bull, as BSBI Recorder for East Norfolk, soon joined in with the project which became *A Flora of Norfolk*.

From the start Gillian set up numerous regular field meetings and gathered a number of local botanists to join in. These people were drawn mostly from the WEA classes she had taught over the years, and who had expressed an interest in botany. Organisation and preparation were the watchwords, and on meeting at 10.30am ("don't be late!") the group was ready to be divided into suitable sub-groups, given their instructions and maps and sent on their way to find and record. Usually lunch was taken together and whilst sandwiches and salad were munched, plants for identification were thrust at Gillian or Ken, sometimes in danger of becoming part of their salad. Identifications and explanations were passed round, so it was a real learning experience for all. Further tetrads were tackled after lunch and at the end of the day, another identification session followed. These meetings were extremely enjoyable for the participants, who appreciated the learning experience, the contribution they were making and the vast knowledge and good humour of Gillian and Ken. Part of the Flora's legacy lies in the Norfolk Flora Group. This is a countywide group of botanists which includes both V.-C. Recorders; it continued to hold regular and frequent meetings after *A Flora of Norfolk* was published in 1999 and carries on to the present day. As Recorders, she and Ken were also well known for being very quick to reply to queries and requests for naming specimens,

something which is always appreciated by botanists.

Gillian wrote some of the introductory chapters for *A Flora of Norfolk* including 'The Setting for the Flora' and 'Man, the Landscape and Plants ... an Historical Perspective'. She also provided over 90 of the photographs. The tetrad maps had an informative and relevant background, showing soil-types, rivers or roads. In the words of Richard Mabey, who wrote the Preface, the book "will be an inspiration to all who love Norfolk and seek out its special plants".

Breckland plants were of special interest to Gillian. An article she produced on them, 'Plants of the Breckland, 1869–1994' (*Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists Society* **30**(1): 53–63, 1994) showed also her special interest in the historical aspects of botany.

Many people who knew Gillian as a botanist were completely unaware of her wide range of other interests and talents. She had a deep knowledge of local history as well as an interest in history in general. She supported the Stanhoe Local Archive group and recorded some fascinating talks on her early life in Stanhoe. She was a fine needlewoman and ran embroidery sessions. One had only to see the doll's house she had furnished with delicately made carpets and curtains to appreciate her skill, and see her embroidered collages on the walls of Bramley Cottage. A member of the

Stanhoe and Barwick WI for over fifty years, Gillian was President for many of these. She re-inaugurated the Stanhoe Flower Show which had lapsed for a time.

Gillian was an excellent cook, and the members of the West Norfolk Flora Group always enjoyed her convivial end of season 'Cake Meetings', when her delicious home-made cakes were eaten, cups of tea drunk and plans for the following year discussed. She was a good pianist and a very good darts player. This skill arose because there was, not surprisingly, a dart board at the Bircham Newton Officers' Mess. Whenever Gillian went with her father she was allowed three darts. Subsequently the local WI put up a dart board in the village hall, and were amazed to witness this undiscovered talent!

After Gillian retired from the Recordship in 2010 she and Ken continued to record plants locally and sent in records for a few years. She was sadly diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2011 and after a minor stroke and a time in a nursing home she suffered a further stroke and died on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2016. She leaves her husband Ken, their son Keith and granddaughter Chelsea.

We have taken several details of Gillian's life in the village from the superb village website [stanhoe.org](http://stanhoe.org), and thank those maintaining it for their help.

TIM DONCASTER & FRANCES SCHUMANN



Gillian Beckett. Photo © Stanhoe Archive