

## Leonard John Margetts (1923–2016)

Len Margetts (Colour Section Plate 2), born in London on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1923, died on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2016. A relatively full account of his life was published in *BSBI News* **118**: 52–53 (2011), marking his award of an honorary membership of our Society. The following appreciation adds some further details of his life and personality as seen by several of us who knew him.

Len's daughter Jill recalls family outings when the children would accompany him on plant hunting expeditions, never because they had to, and there was no pressure to take a more serious interest. Len's own interest was growing. When Dick David suggested they join forces to write a review of F.H. Davey's *Flora of Cornwall* (1909), Len contacted the botanical expert Eric Edees and invited him to stay for two weeks during which he and Len tried to update the Brambles. A kind, almost fond, letter received from the family's guest reveals something of the impression Len must have made on him.

In the 1970s Len was working for a landscaping company, where Bert Biscoe shared journeys in Len's pick-up. Bert recounts conversations that ranged across art, science and always poetry, as they drove along lanes lined with Cow Parsley and brambles.

I (KS) met Len in 1976 and started on a life-changing series of events that led me to botany, first as a serious interest and now as an occupation. This was all very much by example; as with his family Len never pushed you, or even gave you advice, it just happened. When a new variety or subspecies was described in the literature, Len was always keen to search for it. Then he introduced me to the critical groups, and particularly the brambles. "It's the big boy" said Len, showing me *Rubus armeniacus* (Himalayan Giant) by the bridge at Calenick near Truro. That was in 1979 and it's still there.

Len was always ready to help. Jill Sutcliffe calls his contribution to her work "significant".

In 1980 he visited 400 sites of botanical interest across Cornwall to carry out baseline surveys. Jill became the Senior Botanical Coordinator at Natural England, and remembers Len for his kindness, expertise and love of poetry.

The day came when Len and his wife Rona left Cornwall for Devon, exchanging a Victorian mine captain's house for a neat semi in Honiton and the well-travelled flora of Cornwall for new challenges in Devon. Roger Smith remembers him as a botanical referee "for almost everything", and also as a friend, still ready to help and "the best and most influential botanist to live in Devon for many years". Selina Bates and I now had further to go to see our friend but remember outings when we talked about everything from brambles to poetry. A memorable expedition took us to one of Len's bramble hotspots he was delighted to tell us was called 'Blackberry Wood'.

After his beloved Rona died Len stayed on at Honiton, welcoming visitors and showing them around his garden and conservatory, where some delightful botanical curiosities were cared for, among them specimens of *Taraxacum ronae*. He would joke about putting the teapot in the fridge but retained a prodigious memory and kept up his interest in botany. The only time he was beaten by the weather was at East Hill Strips, one of his favourite places, when we had to retreat under a terrific thunderstorm. However Len was beginning to need care, sometimes having difficulty with his balance. In 2011 he drove to the Wellington Memorial in Somerset (another of his former hunting grounds) to join a BSBI bramble meeting – but the quarter-mile walk was too much for him and he had to return home. When care was provided, Len told us how the helpers would bring an evening meal then make sure he went safely to bed. Once they had left, Len said that he would get up and watch television. Roger Smith relates how Len

suffered a particularly worrying fall not long before the decision was made to return to Cornwall.

Len was now nearer to his family and being cared for in St. Clair House, Camborne. A collection of ferns and *Taraxacum ronaë* came with him, along with a selection of his favourite books. Family, friends and botanical colleagues visited him and occasionally we were able to share a meal out and drive Len to some of his favourite places along the Cornish coast. Our last such outing was on a hot June day but Len, clearly tired, was reluctant to go back for his evening meal. By now I had at last taken an interest in the brambles, which Len loved to discuss. On one occasion he had remembered every name but suddenly came to a halt. 'I told you I was losing my memory,' he said, and five minutes later remembered the bramble name that had eluded him.

Among his visitors was former East Cornwall (v.c.2) recorder Rose Murphy, a copy of whose BSBI handbook on the fumitories Len received with admiration. The present recorders Colin French (West Cornwall, v.c.1) and Ian Bennallick (v.c.2) also visited him. Colin remembers logging many of Len's records onto his ERICA database and can speak at first hand of the huge contribution Len made to the Flora of Cornwall. Len once pointed to a record submitted by a boy, the same Ian Bennallick, who now as an adult (like his v.c.1 counterpart) has done so much to record and share the flora of one of the richest botanical regions of our islands. Ian writes as follows: "Len's influence on my botanical

recording was hugely important. I was interested in plants from an early age, and when I was twelve years old I asked for and received a copy of the *Review of the Cornish Flora*, co-written with R. W. David, for Christmas. It was the first 'Flora' I had seen and Len's authoritative accounts on species and distribution in Cornwall directed my recording from then on. On BSBI recording trips Len was very helpful in describing why a plant was what it was – and patient with my attempts at identification!!"

A week before he died Len looked at a draft copy of my Masters thesis on brambles which without him would never have been contemplated and which was eventually published in memory of Len.

Once when we apologised for not having visited for a while, he said "I feel you're always with me", and this was a theme echoed at the celebration of Len's life, at windswept Treswithian Downs, Camborne. The crematorium overlooks a green landscape that Len had spent part of a long and richly rewarded life exploring – riches in Len's terms being those of the spirit.

There seems to be something about botany, gentle and consoling, that might help to make the death of a close friend easier to bear, returning to the old places, looking up old records, reinforcing memories. For those who knew and loved him, although we feel his loss keenly, Len is to that extent "always with us".

KEITH SPURGIN



Len Margetts by the river at Calenick, West Cornwall, c. 1979