Alan Newton

(1927–2016)

With the death of Alan Newton on 11th March 2016 Britain and Ireland lost one more in the long succession of leading field botanists, almost all of them amateurs, who have taken up the especially testing challenge presented by the ultra-large and for long taxonomically very controversial group, *Rubus* subgenus *Rubus*.

Newton's arrival on that scene could scarcely have been better timed. The initial, unrealistically broad interpretation of the group (in so far as these islands were concerned) proffered by Babington in a series of increasingly confident steps through much of the nineteenth century had been radically overhauled by W. Moyle Rogers in the Edwardian years, only for that to be followed between the Wars by two markedly divergent approaches that had failed to be reconciled by the time their respective chief proponents left the scene, the last of them in 1954. Thankfully, salvation then came into sight at the hands of the Staffordshire-based E.S. Edees, who had been specialising in the group independently for a decade and a half, in the light of which he had carried a monographic treatment of his own to an advanced stage of preparation. A serious obstacle, however, was his distance from the main libraries and herbaria, repeated consulting of which was crucial to the resolving of numerous nomenclatural questions that he was only too aware existed. Had he but known it, the collaborator he so obviously needed was at that time living just slightly more than a single county away.

Alan had been born in Manchester, on 18th July 1927, to Arthur Charles Newton, a gas inspector by profession, and Ada née Wilkinson, and except for three years away at university he was to live for all but the last third of his life either in that city or in one of its immediate neighbours. From its renowned grammar school (to which he won a scholarship) he went up to Wadham College, Oxford in 1948 to read Classics. Initially he nursed a vague ambition to pursue a career as a Classical archaeologist, but that would probably have required lengthy spells overseas and by the time he graduated he had decided to remain in Manchester to support his elderly father. After a decade or so on the staff of its town hall, he joined the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority at nearby Risley, on the Lancashire side of Warrington, as a computer manager and was to continue there till his retirement in 1984. That computing background, still comparatively novel then, was a major determinant of the particular form his subsequent botanical research was to take.

It was not till sometime in his late twenties that field botany edged out ornithology as his foremost leisure interest. At university indeed his commitment to the latter had been sufficient to win him the secretaryship of the Oxford Ornithological Society, the body which had pioneered bird censuses in Britain two decades earlier. His decisive switch to studying plants was an unexpected consequence of his marriage in 1952 to Muriel Howson. A country upbringing in Derbyshire had already made her susceptible to putting names to wildflowers, and on his buying her a field guide to those as a present he promptly succumbed as well. It was to be a shared enthusiasm, buttressed for many years by Wild Flower Society membership and the keeping of one of its annual diaries. A further stimulus was the family's move in 1964 to Hale, a village (as it was then) just sufficiently far out of Manchester to the south-west to encourage identifying with the rural county of Cheshire instead. Once there, and among a group of botanically inclined friends, the idea arose of producing a replacement for de Tabley's 1899 *Flora of Cheshire*, by that time seriously out of date. The author of that predecessor, it so chanced, had been an early *Rubus* enthusiast and attempting to update his account of that group constituted a particular challenge. For that task Newton volunteered, no doubt

mindful that two of Cheshire's neighbours had recently had their bramble floras authoritatively studied afresh by Edees, under whose willing tutelage he lost no time in placing himself. The two turned out to complement each other splendidly: as a retired schoolmaster as well as a lay preacher, Edees was accustomed to delivering instruction to sizeable audiences with aplomb (and at a louder volume than normal on account of deafness), whereas Newton was manifestly ill at ease leading a group in the field of more than just one or two, or on the relatively rare occasions when he could be persuaded to give a lecture. Edees did not seem to mind being caught out coming up with a wrong name in the field, whereas Newton would prefer not to commit himself on the spot for fear that a merely tentative identification might become established in the literature.

Though he had joined the BSBI back in 1961, Newton remained focused on the southern part of England's North-west more or less tightly during the ten years that followed. Though his heavy involvement in the fieldwork in 1964–69 for the projected new Flora of the county on a 5 × 5 km grid square basis largely enforced that, the BSBI's attempt at that period to give its activities a strongly regional complexion did not leave him untouched. Not long after work on the new *Flora of Cheshire* had begun, he was asked to take the chair at the inaugural meeting in Manchester of the Society's members resident in its newly-created North West Region. That was to prove the harbinger of his later election as that Region's representative on Council, an elevation, however, that he was very soon to regret: there were too many people on that body, he felt, and much of the business discussed was of too little local relevance to justify the lengthy train journeys to London. He was more than ready to stand down after serving the minimum term.

But once he had started grappling with Cheshire's share of England's bramble species – of which he was to describe six more new to science in *Watsonia* in 1971 (the first of what were to be several such batches in later years) – he probably regretted even more having let himself in for the onerous task of putting together the intended book embodying the results of the intensive re-surveying of the county's vascular flora as a whole. For he was impatient by then to start devoting all of his leisure to specialising in *Rubus* and, more immediately, to assisting Edees by carrying out the further herbarium-cum-library research that they both saw as essential before the projected new monograph on that group in the British Isles could be rated sufficiently rounded to qualify for publication. Sadly, the new *Flora of Cheshire* that emerged in 1971 was the sufferer, disappointing in its comparative brevity many who had expected a work of considerably greater substance.

A stay of several days in London was Newton's immediate priority, with a view to locating type material of Continental taxa and checking the correctness of numerous names suspected of having been applied to British and Irish *Rubus* on the basis solely of printed descriptions. In that arduous undertaking help was to be had from a collection of glass slides at South Kensington made from photographs Barton had accumulated during the 1930s by means of loans from likely Continental herbaria. *Brambles of the British Isles* would in due course include an appendix listing 163 species names proved or suspected of having been misapplied to brambles occurring in these islands.

Only after that vast nomenclatural purge was well under way could the no less daunting process begin of redetermining as necessary the many relevant sheets at Kew and the Natural History Museum. More or less inaccessible since his death in 1955, W.C. Barton's *Rubus* collection in the latter was stupendous in size, the result of his practice of taking numerous examples of any bramble he met with that he could not confidently identify, with a view to capturing as fully as possible the range of variation it exhibited. One sight of the collection was enough to elicit an airy request from Newton for it to be loaded in its entirety on to a pantechnicon and dispatched up to The Manchester Museum forthwith, for studying

and redetermining it would clearly entail repeated visits to that over many months and these were feasible only if the collection was in reasonable reach of his home. Before that could take place, however, the collection needed mounting at the London end in its entirety – and on the standard sheets used by the Natural History Museum embossed with its name. That in itself would be a long-drawn-out task, given the heavy pressure already on the limited staff of mounters. The best the Museum could offer, therefore, was sending up to Manchester periodic bundles of mounted specimens on specified time limits. But that arrangement proved in practice to have the drawback that a consignment could consist of no more than a single species and that maybe a common one. At perhaps three-quarters of the way through Newton's heroic patience gave out – and the task was eventually to be completed by another hand, at the London end, spasmodically over a period of several years. Nevertheless the scope of the projected monograph had been widened more than adequately by then and it was time at last for it to be put into print – with Newton justly named as co-author.

At that point, alas, there was an unexpected stumble. The original plan to publish the *Rubus* account in a proposed 'Critical Flora' of Britain and Ireland had to be abandoned after the Flora project failed to receive funding. Instead the Ray Society fortunately proved willing to bring out the section on *Rubus* as a stand-alone publication. The distributions of the 306 species were illustrated by 10-km square maps, hand-plotted in the Cambridge herbarium from a printout derived from the computer database devised and maintained by Newton. Although these maps had always been intended for inclusion in the account, publication as a book also allowed the incorporation of 99 black-and-white photographs of herbarium specimens of the most widespread species and a superb six-page introductory history of the group's investigation in these islands added by Newton. Energetically steered through a prolonged period of consultation with fellow specialists by D.H. Kent, *Brambles of the British Isles* eventually arrived in print in 1988, to wide acclaim, effectively replacing its by then thirty-year-old predecessor, the seriously misleading *Handbook* that W.C.R. Watson had left as his legacy.

While their book quickly realised the hopes of its two authors of attracting several further recruits to the study of the group, especially in counties in which it had been particularly under-investigated, Newton proceeded to push his own geographical coverage steadily more widely. Those kindred spirits who joined him on his field excursions found him an informative, entertaining and – at times – infuriating companion. Until his advent *Rubus* fieldwork had been carried out preponderantly on foot, for nearly all the lowland areas are sufficiently rich in bramble diversity to keep pedestrian batologists amply occupied for much of their lifetimes. An inveterate motorist, Newton preferred instead the rapid, if cursory, surveys that that alternative form of propulsion renders feasible, a way of working well suited in any case to the by then standard practice in Britain and Ireland of recording species distributions on the basis of 10-km squares of the countries' respective Ordnance Survey national grids. That unfortunately clashed with the long-traditional method of recording in terms of named localities (at any rate for the less common species), giving rise to misunderstandings. In the Irish Republic, for example, where several county Floras were actively in preparation on that customary pattern, Newton lacked the level of funding sufficient to allow intensive searches of probably productive localities and instead made hurried lists in his sample spots across the countryside as a whole, disregarding county boundaries. He was in such a rush on the main trip (out of three to Ireland) he made for this express purpose that specimens he snatched of species he could not name on the spot were left undetermined in his herbarium on his return to England, only to come to light there many years afterwards (when one or two proved to be exciting rarities). It may well be that he intended to investigate Ireland's comparatively rich bramble flora more thoroughly later on, but that was never to

happen. Ironically, he did once tour the Scottish Highlands (ranging even up to Caithness), though *Rubus* species are very few there – but that seems to have been essentially a scenic undertaking, for the delectation of his wife. Ordinarily his botanising travels, at any rate in Britain, were primarily to work out more fully, in reasonably broad terms, the distribution of each of the 300 or so species to have so far received taxonomic recognition: he was less concerned to do that in the case of those that (seemingly) lacked a name despite a wide occurrence, for, though Latin presented no problem for him, drawing up descriptions was laborious and he was content to employ just nicknames of his own devising.

Though his published writings on *Rubus* give the impression that he concentrated on Britain and Ireland exclusively, that is misleading. From the early 1970s for many years he regularly holidayed in other parts of West and Central Europe, normally with his family and so underplaying botany. In addition he acted as leader of a number of plant-hunting groups both there and in the Mediterranean region. But the most important Continental trip by far was to Belgium and Germany in 1974, for it was there that he made the acquaintance of Heinrich Weber, the foremost authority in Europe on *Rubus*, and under his guidance saw many Continental brambles unknown in these islands (examples of some of which he subsequently donated to Cardiff). That was the start of a specially fruitful friendship, continued mainly by extensive correspondence. Two summers later Weber reciprocated with a fortnight of *Rubus* on our side of the Channel, with Newton this time in the driving-seat. Following a circuitous route the two managed to see 117 named species as well as several more that defeated them. It was so exhausting that they both felt in need of a holiday of comparable length after it! Weber was to come over again in 2001 to attend a *Rubus* meeting in Sussex (Colour Section Plate 4).

Ten years after the arrival of that bracing fresh breeze from Germany, retirement arrived for Newton – and with it very much more time to devote to *Rubus*. It was also an opportunity at last to exchange the environs of Manchester for a town with less polluted air and thus less inimical for his wife's asthma but at the same time not too far away from their roots. Leamington Spa, two counties and some 80 miles to the south, seemed at first an ideal choice, but they turned out to have overlooked that it lies in a bowl from which vehicle fumes have difficulty escaping. It was from Leamington in 1991 that he published a *Supplement to Flora of Cheshire*, a volume matching the original Flora in its brevity. After 14 years there it became increasingly imperative to move again, this time very much further south and preferably on the sea. Exmouth in Devon met those criteria admirably and there they lived for the rest of their lives, his wife's death sadly preceding Newton's by several years. Towards the end one of his two daughters moved in to take over from the carers he had been relying on till then, but that meant there was room no more for the *Rubus* herbarium. Apart from the unnamed Irish specimens, which were donated to me, he had all along intended that they should join Herb. Edees at Cardiff; a new regime there, however, ruled that out on space grounds and – perhaps more appropriately after all – it returned to the city in which it had been conceived: Manchester and the museum at its university. At the same juncture it made sense for him to step down as the principal BSBI *Rubus* referee after 39 years.

The *Atlas of British and Irish Brambles*, the second of his two principal publications, this one published by the BSBI, he would surely have liked to regard as a fitting memorial – even though he outlived its appearance in 2004 by twelve years. His fellow batologist-cum-computing specialist, Rob Randall, on whose expertise he had relied heavily at the production stage (and whose years of *Rubus* collecting in the West Country were responsible for so many of the dots on the distribution maps), he felt it only right and proper to be named as co-author. Records added to the maps in the sixteen years that had elapsed since the appearance of the monograph were distinguished by a separate symbol, thus revealing the enormous quantity of additional research that

had by then rendered the distributional data in the earlier work misleadingly out of date. The new volume, however, could do nothing to prevent the Ray Society book fast becoming seriously inadequate as an identification manual. Since its publication no fewer than 42 further named species have been added to the British-cum-Irish list – and these must be still considerably short of the potential ultimate total. One of those 42 is *R. newtonii*, a bramble found to be widespread in Northumberland, its name chosen by its describer, G.H. Ballantyne, in 2002 in honour of the one mainly responsible for the recognising of its distinctness.

To his son Adrian I am indebted for many of the details in this account, more particularly of the earlier years. On behalf of the Society I extend to him, his brother and his two sisters deep sympathy for their loss of a father whom many in the European botanical community will also greatly miss.

DAVID ALLEN

Batologists and Sussex naturalists at Midhurst, Sussex, 13 July 2001. Left to right: Rob Randall, Mike Porter, Alan Newton, Chris Porter, Heinrich Weber, Peter Jones, Dave Earl, Helen Proctor