

CHARLES ADRIAN SINKER O.B.E., M.A., F.I.Biol. (1931–2010)

Charles Sinker was born in Cambridge on 29 April 1931 and died at his home, North Mytton House near Shrewsbury, on 23 January 2010. He was the first Warden of the Field Studies Council's Preston Montford Field Centre from 1956 to 1973 and then the Council's first Director until 1983, when Parkinson's disease forced him to retire at the early age of 52. Two years later his *magnum opus*, *Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region*, was published. He joined the BSBI in 1949, the year that he left school, thus achieving over 60 years of membership. He was its Vice-county Recorder for Shropshire from 1961 to 1976 and for Montgomeryshire from 1961 to 1969. He married Margaret Dibb and they had two children, Mark and Rebecca. Margaret died in April 2005; Charles and she lie buried together in the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul, Fitz, in Shropshire.

Much of Charles's early life was spent in Cambridge, where his father Paul (1905–1977) was a Fellow of Jesus College and taught classics. Charles went to Shrewsbury School, where he was taught biology by Paul Holmes, "was introduced to 'serious' botany – Latin as well as folk names – by Mrs Honor Pendlebury (née Leeke)" and explored the surrounding countryside. In 1948 Paul left to become the first Warden of the Field Studies Council's Malham Tarn Field Centre. The following year Charles left school to study Natural Sciences at Peterhouse, Cambridge, reading Botany. His undergraduate friend Graham Darrach said at his funeral at Fitz on 12 February 2010: "Charles was definitely not good at ordinary ball games, but he was at croquet. He had an elegant straw boater and cut a fine figure on a croquet lawn or on a punt. He was also tall, dolichocephalic (we both had a liking for words) and dark-haired and so could wear black – very much an 'in colour'." Like his namesake Charles Darwin, he maintained that he was lazy while at Cambridge. When his degree proved to be unspectacular he remarked that the Cambridge

M.A. was automatic, "so my C.V. will be O.K.". Writing in *FSC magazine* No. 37, 3–6 (Spring 2010), his colleague and friend Ian Mercer has commented: "Given the mental and physical energy he displayed for the next thirty years, the 'lazy' epithet hardly fits. Perhaps he used the whole-life quota of laziness up while at Cambridge, to the FSC's everlasting benefit."

So great had been Paul Holmes's influence that Charles spent much of his time during the university vacations at Malham. There he honed his ecological skills and learnt about the practical work involved in running a field centre. Wishing to understand the karst limestone of Malham, he taught himself Serbo-Croat so that he could read papers descriptive of the classic karst region of Slovenia and Croatia. When the first Assistant Warden left Malham in 1952 Paul Holmes invited Charles to take the job. He served for three years before returning to Shropshire in 1956 to become the first Warden at Preston Montford, a post that he held for the next 16 years.

The FSC's new centre, its fifth and the first since 1948, was an early 18th-century dower house on the Wingfield estate, just west of Shrewsbury, that had latterly been used as a residential home. In 1957 Charles married Margaret Dibb (1935-2005), whom he had met when she was a student helper at Malham; Mark spoke at his funeral of "the magical space Mum and Dad made for us, growing up surrounded by young idealistic adults at Preston Montford Field Centre, ... a place full of laughter".

Many botanists and ecologists will have first met Charles as students at Preston Montford and been immediately impressed by his skills in the field and the lecture room. Ian Trueman has written in an obituary of Charles for the Shropshire Wildlife Trust: "Those of us who have had the privilege to see him teach will remember both his effortless command of his subject and his surprising ability to illustrate his talks with chalk and board. His writings communicate his deep knowledge and under-

standing, his values and sometimes, too, his sense of humour.” Charles was an accomplished draughtsman and artist as well as a remarkable field teacher. His drawings for his paper ‘The North Shropshire Meres and Mosses: A background for ecologists’ (*Field Studies* 1(4): 101–138: 1962) certainly bear witness to that. Charles was particularly pleased with the mini-elk that he sneaked into the burgeoning postglacial forest in one of his diagrams of hydrosere development in closed basin sites on page 131.

Working closely with Dr Tom Pritchard, the newly appointed Regional Officer of the Nature Conservancy at Attingham Park, Charles was influential in the development of ecological studies in Shropshire. His own detailed and lucid paper on the Meres and Mosses mentioned above led to a much greater appreciation of their importance in Britain; as a result Crose Mere and Whixall and Wem Mosses are now widely known. In her ‘Freshwater studies

in the Shropshire Union Canal’ (*Field Studies* 1(1): 116–142: 1959) a member of Charles’s staff, Heather M. Twigg, acknowledged both his sketches and “his unflinching help and encouragement, without which this article would never have been written”. Charles and Tom attracted many experts to work and publish on the features of the county.

Charles’s botanical and conservation interests extended to the west of Shropshire (as later indicated by the area that he insisted should be covered in *Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region*), particularly to the Breidden Hills, situated in Montgomeryshire but clearly visible from Preston Montford. He had known them since he had been “lured out from school” there on his bicycle “to explore the rocky slopes” and now they were threatened by quarrying for “road surfacing material” and “the facing of buildings”. In European Conservation Year, 1970, he contributed Chapter XVIII, ‘On the rocks: quarrying and conservation at Craig



Charles Sinker teaching at Preston Montford Field Centre with the River Sever and the Breidden Hills behind him. Photo Field Studies Council © c.1970

Breidden, Montgomeryshire', to *Welsh Wildlife in Trust*, published by the North Wales Naturalists' Trust and edited by William S. Lacey. In it he explains how he "applied for and received from the Natural Environment Research Council in 1967 a research grant to study the vegetation and soils of dolerite outcrops on Craig Breidden. A Research Assistant, Mr S.C. Jarvis, was appointed and has now nearly completed his studies with results of outstanding interest. ... There is now good reason to hope that the really important parts of these classic crags will survive, together with the curious plant communities and rare species which they carry."

In 1965, when the Nature Conservancy organised a national conference on environmental education at the University of Keele as part of the programme of 'The Countryside in 1970' and set up an Education Advisory Section (EAS) at Attingham Park, of which I became the head in 1967, there began a period of close collaboration between the FSC and the NC in the wider promotion of field studies with due concern for the conservation of the sites used for them. The FSC decided to convene a one-day conference to discuss issues relevant to those responsible for field studies at residential centres; for this conference, held in London on 6 November 1965, Charles analysed and presented background data obtained by means of a questionnaire from 67 centres in England and Wales. One of its resolutions was "that a Committee be set up to take the work of the Conference further", and for the next three years the Field Studies Facilities Committee (FSFC), chaired and serviced by the FSC and with Charles and me as members, provided a link between organisations interested in the development of field studies in Britain and sought to promote the conference's resolutions. For example it published *The Conservation Code for studies out of doors*, issued on a pilot basis in 1967 and revised for wide distribution with the title *Outdoor Studies Code* in 1968, with ten slogans on the lines of the familiar *Country Code* but specifically aimed at providing guidance for outdoor studies. In that year the NC set up the Council for Environmental Education, coincidentally chaired by Charles's uncle Sir Jack Longland until 1975 and for which I acted as Secretary until longstanding

arrangements could be made, and its Resources Committee took over the role of the FSFC. The following year this committee conducted a further questionnaire survey and in 1970 it published *Directory of centres for outdoor studies in England and Wales*. In 1972 Charles, my EAS colleague Antony T. Herbert and I published a detailed analysis and discussion of the questionnaire returns from 195 centres, with seven precautionary recommendations for the planning of future developments; this was 'Centres for field studies in England and Wales: the results of a questionnaire survey in 1969' (*Field Studies* 3: 655–679), in which fuller details of the events described in this paragraph can also be found.

Charles had long had a particular interest in aquatic plants and in 1975 he collaborated with Sylvia M. Haslam and Pat A. Wolseley (who drew the illustrations) to produce 'British water plants', originally published as a long paper in *Field Studies* 4: 243–351 but subsequently reprinted separately "with the same pagination"; it was revised as an AIDGAP field guide in 1987 and is still in print. The FSC's AIDGAP project (an ingenious acronym – Charles's? – for Aids to Identification in Difficult Groups of Animals and Plants) was initiated in 1976, with an advisory panel including a range of organisations such as the Linnean Society, teachers in secondary education and professional illustrators, and now includes 70 laminated fold-out charts and over 25 field guides. But Charles was ahead of the game and had already published 'A lateral key to common grasses' the year before, in *Bulletin of the Shropshire Conservation Trust* 34: 11–18, with 18 "character descriptions" in a table with symbols for YES, USUALLY NO, NO and INAPPLICABLE and with a cut-out "scanning strip"; he later had it reprinted in a larger format. In it he quoted, as a comparison to it, "the charming Homeric epigram reputedly inscribed on the tomb of Midas" in which "it does not matter which line ... you read first, or in what order you read them; the meaning is the same". In the acknowledgements he thanked me for helping him "to run it down" and wrote (characteristically): "The solution to the problem of presenting a multi-dimensional non-sequential selection in a two-di-

mensional format came to me while contemplating a washing machine after (and as a result of) reading ‘The Use of Lateral Thinking’ by Edward de Bono; it is in gratitude to him that the Lateral Key is so named.” I also have an undated copy of an A4 card, ‘A Lateral Key To Salix Species And Hybrids by C A Sinker and A L D Bebbington’, labelled “AIDGAP Test version”.

Charles later wrote in a very frank memoir in a booklet about Parkinson’s disease that he first noticed tremors in 1965 and was diagnosed in 1967. Despite this handicap he was able to accept appointment to the post of Director of the FSC in February 1973. His national standing was confirmed by his appointment to the England Committee of the newly created Nature Conservancy Council in the same year. Ian Mercer comments again: “That began a recognition of the FSC in eco-political circles that has persisted ever since, and grown remarkably under his successor.” In 1979 Charles was appointed O.B.E. for his services to nature conservation. In 1983 he decided that owing to his deteriorating health the time had come for him to stand down. Writing in *Field Studies* in 1993 (8: 245–255) in celebration of the FSC’s Golden Jubilee, Professor R.J. (‘Sam’) Berry described Charles as “a major force in changing the necessarily pragmatic approach of the earlier years into the professional effectiveness of the mature Council”. Berry continued: “Sinker’s insistence on a holistic approach to the environment is wholly in the tradition of the great British naturalists – John Ray, Gilbert White, Charles Darwin, and people like Arthur Tansley who were midwives to the FSC.”

Despite his premature retirement Charles’s energy seemed for a time undiminished. *Ecological Flora of the Shropshire Region* was published in 1985 by the Shropshire Trust for Nature Conservation (now the Shropshire Wildlife Trust). Its methodology had already been explained in a paper in 1979 in *Watsonia* 12: 239–247, ‘Preparing a new Flora of the Shropshire region using a federal system of recording’ by J.R. Packham *et al.*, surprisingly Charles’s only contribution to the BSBI’s journal. Ian Trueman, like me a fellow-author of the Flora, has written: “It was described at the

time as being one of the very few good things produced by a committee, but there was never any doubt that it was principally Charles’s work. He inspired the massive amount of field work by volunteers which was necessary and made sure that it was a seminal ecological description as well as a catalogue. Will Prestwood had the good luck to work with him on the ecological descriptions of the species and says that he seemed to know the intimate details of each one. The ecological description of individual species was a first in English; there have been a number of fine, systematic attempts to do the same since but I return again and again to his. His original idea about coincidence mapping is now commonplace and yet almost never acknowledged. His analysis of the Shropshire flora is still fundamental for nature conservation here and elsewhere.”

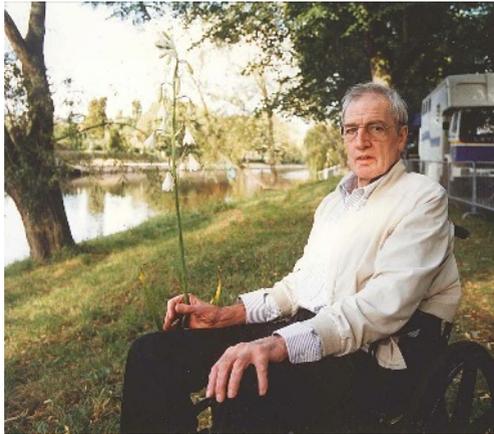


Charles Sinker on saltmarsh near Flatford Mill Field Centre, still able to leap across a gutter.
Photo Field Studies Council © 1973

Charles introduces the concept of coincidence mapping on page 156 of the Flora as “a method which enhances or intensifies the ‘signal’ while diminishing the irrelevant ‘noise’”. There follow six pages of text and maps to exemplify the method in different habitat types and in comparisons of pre-1913

and post-1969 records. The lists of associated species in the ecological descriptions in Chapter 10 show that Charles was an expert bryologist as well as knowing vascular plants so well.

Charles immediately embarked on another labour of love, the editing of *Hilda Murrell's Nature Diaries 1961–1983*, published by Collins in 1987. Hilda Murrell (1906–1984) was a well-known rose grower (whose business was sold to Percy Thrower on her retirement in 1970) and leading authority on old-fashioned roses, an antinuclear campaigner and a founder-member and for many years a Council member of the Shropshire Trust, of which Charles was effectively the founder, its first Secretary, then President and finally for many years Patron.



Charles Sinker by the River Sever during his last visit to the Shrewsbury Flower Show, holding a newly purchased Summer Hyacinth or Spire Lily (*Galtonia candicans*).

Photo Rebecca Sinker © 2003

At Charles's funeral his son Mark provided a vivid picture of his later years: "Latterly, increasingly trapped in a truculent body, he continued to enjoy the suppleness and reach of his mind." Mark described him as "poet, scientist, gentleman, this gentlest of men, who was also, in his quiet, unhurried, daring, dauntless way, the warrior who fashioned his own way to face down the disease that had menaced and threatened to vanquish him when he was still quite a young man". He spoke too of "the speed dial on his little

electric scooter turned up full, so he could career perilously round and sometimes into his beloved flower-beds and alpine rockery, with whoever was with him scampering far behind. To his great joy, the Himalayan blue poppy finally flowered by the rockery last summer."

"When he learned, two years ago, from his new specialist, that he had had Parkinson's for an almost unheard-of span – 42 years, more than half his life – and that he had possibly endured it longer than anyone recorded, there was a pause for thought, and perhaps for comic timing, and then he asked, and in his soft little voice, with a tiny but typical flash of justified competitive pride, 'Recorded in the country or recorded in the world?'"

I am very grateful to Graham Darrah, Ian Mercer, Mark Sinker and Ian Trueman for material included in this obituary – more than is here specifically attributed to them – and to the Field Studies Council and Rebecca Sinker for the photographs of Charles. He was a dear friend and a huge influence in my life; it is a great privilege to be able to compile an obituary for him. Finally, I shall quote Graham again: "People are sometimes surprised that as a zoologist I know so much botany. The answer is simple – Charles taught me."

PHILIP H. OSWALD

Gravity, queen and mistress of my night,
Lead me with silken dread to where you lurk
And take me, as the spider takes her mate:
Suck out my juices in the pulsing dark.
Gossamer shackles trip my shuffling feet;
The viscous air waylays me as I walk
Towards that soft arena where I fought,
And fell, last night and every night this week.
Gulliver's, not the gladiator's, fate:
Under this net no hot blood spills like milk;
I lie here, palsied, between sheet and sheet,
And cannot turn my stiff, recumbent hulk.
Gravity, mistress, queen, drink deep tonight:
Turn hulk to husk, and so let me be light!

C. A. Sinker, October 1984