

## George Gordon Graham (1917–2015)

The Reverend George Gordon Graham was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1996 and the citation read simply: *For services to Botany*. Gordon was always rather coy and reticent about the award and relatively dismissive of any attempt to get him to elaborate on how the citation might be accurately interpreted. When I tried, he responded with an inscrutable smile and the mischievously flippant comment that it must have been due to the fact that he had been born on Empire Day, 24 May! Seven years later, in May 2003, Franklyn Perring presented him for the accolade of Honorary Member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles and now, I am honoured to attempt a full analysis of the 'services to botany' for which he was doubly rewarded. It is to the composition of a veritable *Floreat Flora* in his honour that I must direct this eulogy.

Gordon was born in the north-east Derbyshire village of Eckington on Empire Day 1917. On leaving the local secondary school in 1935, he took up a position with the Sheepbridge Coal & Iron Company, near Chesterfield, working initially as a laboratory metallurgical chemist and then in a reserved occupation during the Second World War, employed in the analysis of German armaments. As a diversion from the daily grind, in the evenings he took a home study course in Greek and Latin through the curriculum offered by Wolsey Hall, Oxford and cycled regularly to hear concerts of classical music at Sheffield City Hall. With the uncertainty of post-war asset splitting within the company, Gordon made the decision to quit his vocation as an industrial metallurgist and answer his chosen call to the ministry, enrolling as an undergraduate at St Chad's College, Durham in January 1945. It was here that his interest in botany was sparked by the purchase of John Hutchinson's *Common wild flowers* and *More common wild flowers* (1945, 1948), bought from the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge bookshop, located within

the cathedral precincts. Unwittingly, he had begun the perpetuation of the botanical parson tradition that had been characterised by such luminaries as John Ray and Gilbert White and was to become so predominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Gordon graduated in 1948 with a BA Degree in Theology followed by a further Diploma in Theology, and then took up the post of Deacon at Christ's Church, Luton, Bedfordshire, acting as Priest in 1951 and 1952. He moved north to a curacy at All Saints, Bakewell, Derbyshire from 1953 to 1956 and it was here that he truly began to develop his botanical interests, in his seemingly idyllic post as assistant priest-in-charge of St Anne's Church in the village of Over Haddon. He became a member of the BSBI in 1956 and proceeded to submit field records for Lathkill Dale to Franklyn Perring for the first *Atlas of the British Flora* (1962). He also enthusiastically followed his interest in bell-ringing on the peal of eight at Bakewell, where his strong, sturdy frame enabled him to ring the heaviest, tenor bell, weighing 17 hundredweight. The church of All Saints in the nearby village of Youlgreave, however, also had a tenor bell, weighing 23 hundredweight (2546 pounds), and needless to say, Gordon was attracted to ring there. The walk or motor-cycle ride from Bakewell to Youlgreave wound down through Lathkill Dale and he was thus able to combine his two loves of botany and campanology, answering the massive tenor challenge in a peal of grandsire triples and botanising on the way home.

Gordon was next appointed to the living of All Saints, Wheatley Hill, in 1956, a church that had been at the heart of the coal-mining village since its establishment as a mission in 1873. He was destined to minister in this parish for thirteen years until 1969, the most significant period of his life for a variety of reasons. First, it was here that he married his wife, Paddy S. Puttee, and started a family, Sidonie (1965) and Philippa (1967). He first met Paddy when both were

attending courses at the Field Studies Council's Slapton Ley Field Centre in 1962. She was an excellent field botanist and at the time worked for the FSC at Flatford Mill; it was not long before she transferred to the Ford Castle Outdoor Activity Centre, near Etal in North Northumberland, from where she was able to spend more time with Gordon. One of the first botanical trips the couple made before marriage was to Orkney with Franklyn Perring in 1963, while back in County Durham, a good deal of their joint fieldwork concentrated on recording and mapping for the *Critical supplement to the Atlas of the British Flora* (1968). Gordon was destined to extend this line of critical botanical work for the next decade and, in collaboration with Martin Wigginton, to produce an invaluable handbook for field workers – *Critical species, subspecies, varieties and hybrids in the Durham Flora* (1976), later to be published by Nature Conservancy Council as *Guide to the identification of some difficult plant groups* (1981).

It was during the early 1960s that Gordon met the leading field botanist in the north-east of England, J.W. Heslop Harrison, enquiring of him whether he had plans for a flora of County Durham, to be told that all the records could be found in *The Vasculum*, a publication founded by himself. Gordon set about transcribing all these records and this was the start of the work for his subsequent *Flora & Vegetation of County Durham*. Heslop Harrison also encouraged Gordon's interest in rhodology and he became so active in the subject that Ronald Melville, specialist in the genus *Rosa* and curator at Kew, visited the region to work with him on the uncommon hybrids found particularly in habitats overlying the Magnesian Limestone. In later years, Gordon considered himself lucky to have worked with probably the two most expert rhodologists of the day. A third influence came in the shape of David Bellamy, through whose enthusiasm he was inspired to pursue his bryological interests and also to adopt a strong conservationist philosophy for his botanising. He thus began to concentrate a greater proportion of his field survey on an examination of habitats and plant communities that were under threat of extinction due to the

development of local extractive industries. As a result, Castle Eden Dene and Thrislington are now designated as National Nature Reserves.

The Flora of the County Palatine project grew apace after Gordon had moved in 1969 to take up the living of Hunwick, another former coal mining village, near Bishop Auckland (Colour Section Plate 1). Gordon's ambitions for a unique and nonpareil county flora had a scope and design which amalgamated the examples set by such previous works as Linton's *Flora of Derbyshire* (1903), an icon of its age in that it not only included flowering plants and higher cryptogams, but also mosses and hepatics; Gordon followed suit and added lichens as well. A second influence was the neat and tidy *Flora of Hertfordshire* (1967), compiled by John Dony, which introduced the now familiar tetrad mapping system; and the third was *A computer-mapped Flora* [of Warwickshire] (1971). Whilst working on the Flora Project, Gordon was combining fieldwork for the Flora with the completion of a Master's Degree on *Phytosociological studies of relict woodlands in the north-east of England* under the supervision of David Bellamy. This was to lead to collaboration with John Rodwell on the National Vegetation Classification, the contribution of many sample relevés to the five volumes of *British Plant Communities* and the addition of an original section to the Flora of invaluable phytosociological data, collected by the author alone, a gargantuan task on its own.

The basic field record collection was overseen by the Durham Flora Committee, the administrative centre for the project being based in the Botany Department of Durham University. Gordon was Chair of the Committee and after early changes in personnel much of the progress was due to Myra Burnip of Darlington as Secretary and Julie Stobbs (née Gaman) as Records Secretary. The underlying importance of the Flora Project was the fact that the work involved both amateur and academic botanists, the expertise of the University Computer Unit (notably that of 'Diz' Diaz), Peter Davis of Sunderland Museum who established a database for the purpose of co-ordinating all biological recording in the area, an excellent water-colourist in the shape of Derek Hall of

Sunderland Polytechnic, and, of course, a broad spectrum of the general public motivated by the Durham County Conservation Trust. The co-ordination and implementation of such an important social and community project had become a major contribution to society well beyond a mere 'service to Botany'.

The Durham Flora was published in 1988, the same year as *Flora of Leicestershire*, co-edited by Tony Primavesi, a good friend of Gordon, and like him, a man of the cloth, but a member of the Roman Catholic Rosminian Order, rather than a vicar of the Church of England. The pair had collaborated extensively in recording the genus *Rosa* in both counties and their deep and intensive research in the field and the herbaria of the country led to a revision of the genus in the BSBI Handbook, *Roses of Great Britain and Ireland* (1993). Arthur Chater, as editor of the handbook, was able to act as referee when differences of taxonomic opinion arose, and the book remains the standard rhodological text. In the meantime, Gordon and Paddy had moved on to undertake botanical consultancy contracts in North-east England, such as recording details of the plant communities in which *Gentiana verna* occurred in Upper Teesdale and surveys of the floristics of woodlands in the ownership of

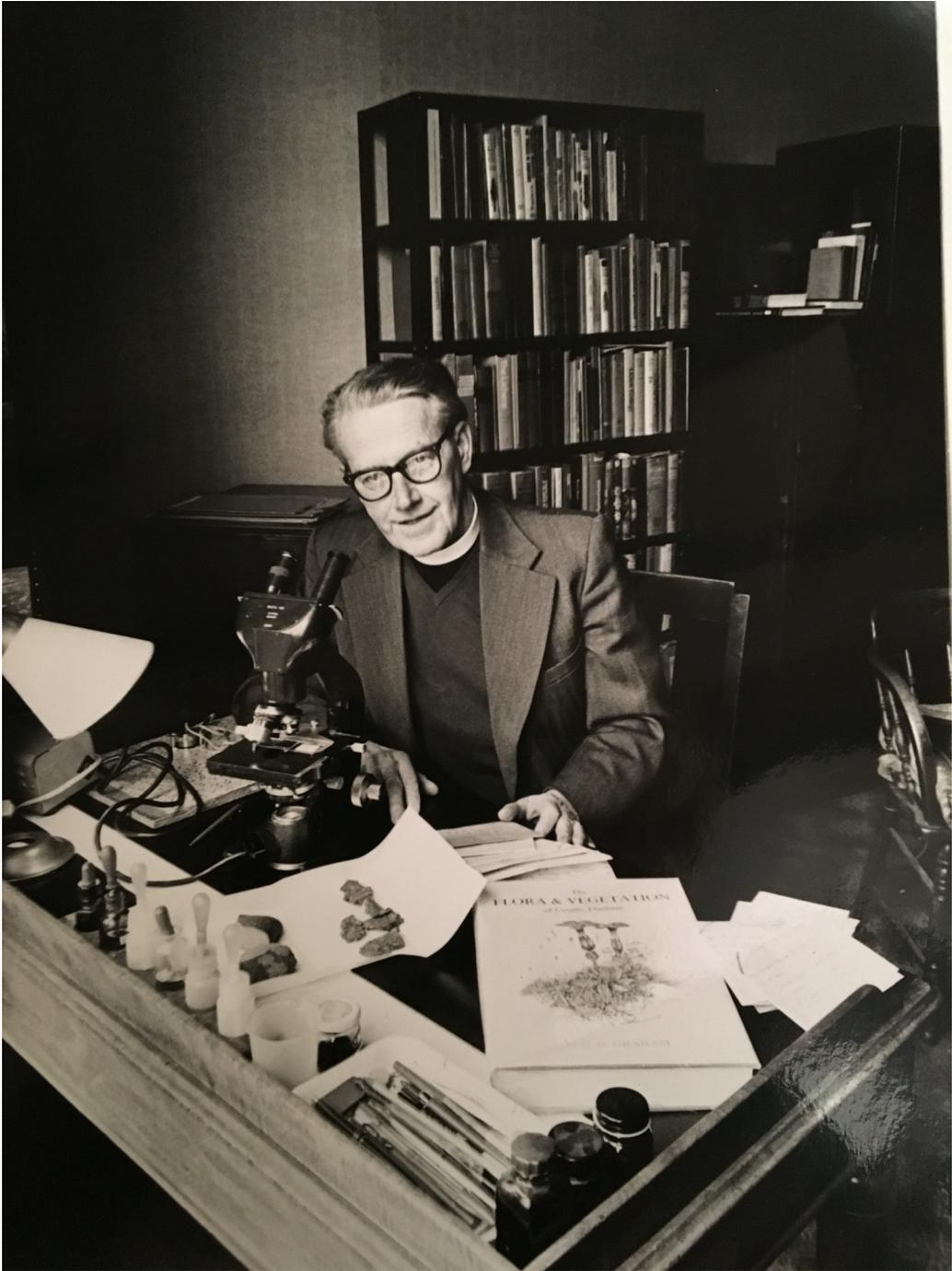
Sunderland City Council, extensive databases awaiting analysis.

Failing eyesight led Gordon to gradually relinquish the role of Vice-County Recorder, a position he had held since 1968, to Alec Coles in the time of data collation for the *New Atlas* in the late 1990s and then, with his blessing, to John Durkin in 2006. As Vice-County Recorder, and as a referee for *Rosa*, Gordon had been an exemplary correspondent, and those consulting him would usually receive a long and detailed letter in response to their enquiries. John Durkin is pleased to acknowledge that the diligence, care and sheer quantity of recording that Gordon invested in the Flora project, plus his herbarium, now preserved in the Discovery Museum, Newcastle, are fundamental to the current BSBI database and vital foundations for the compilation of the *Rare Plant Register* for County Durham.

Gordon died on 8 December 2015 yet continues to be a personal inspiration and I am minded to conclude this eulogy with the words of his own lifelong inspiration, St Augustine of Hippo in *Civitate Dei*, Book 7: 30

*Quamvis enim nihil esse possit sine Ipso: tamen non sunt quod Ipse.*

DAVID SHIMWELL



Gordon Graham at work in his study at Hunwick vicarage, 1988