

## GILLIAN MARGARET GENT (1927–2018)

I first met Gill when a mutual friend suggested that I get in touch with her. I had just finished my evening class studies in chemistry, and I wanted to pick up my botanical interests again. Unannounced I knocked on her door one evening, and I was welcomed in. We talked botany non-stop for the next three hours. Gill told me about local societies which I ought to join, and we exchanged information on many wildlife sites in Northants and farther afield. She was very helpful to a novice botanist, and very friendly. It did not take long to realise that this was her abiding nature. Many mutual friends have borne testament to this aspect of Gill's nature.

Born on 7th July 1927, Gill was the elder of the two daughters of Mr & Mrs Ekins who lived in Croyland Road, Wellingborough, Northants. Her father worked in the boot and shoe trade. She lived in Wellingborough for all of her life. She attended Wellingborough High School and developed her interest in natural history in general, and wild flowers in particular, while she was still at school. She met up with Peter Gent during the Second World War. Peter admired some of her paintings and drawings of flowers etc., and while he was on active service they exchanged letters about them. The family still treasure much of Gill's artwork.

Gill did her bit for the war effort as a land girl. She and Peter got engaged officially on VE day with a family tea party in the bluebell woods in Odell, Bedfordshire. They married in May 1948. They had their reception the night before so that straight after the ceremony they could catch a train to Scotland, complete with their bicycles, so that they could get out into the countryside and in amongst the natural history. Their entire married life was spent at their home in Irthlingborough Road. Over the next eight years Gill gave birth to Andrew, Rosemary, Caroline and Nicholas. The family spent most of their holidays camping in the New Forest and in Wales. They were keen apiculturists, supplementing the family's diets and finances with the honey they produced. One unusual family practice was eschewing 'The Box'. Gill only got a television set late in life. Gill and Peter's shared interest in wildlife lasted throughout their years together until Peter died in August 1998. They both nurtured this interest in their four children, grandchildren and great-



Gill Gent in woods near Pancrasweek, Devon, on 31st May 2013, the last time that she was able to walk through a bluebell wood. *Rosie Beat (née Gent).*

grandchildren. And in anyone else they met!

Gill joined the BSBI in 1947, and remained in membership to the end; over 71 years. Her botanical expertise grew so that, in 1965, the BSBI appointed her as Vice-County Recorder for Northants, v.c.32. She held this post for 46 years, sharing the last few years with Rob Wilson who then took over the post completely. During this time she, of course, reported county news of plants to the BSBI journals, and kept voucher specimens of many of them.

When the Northamptonshire Naturalists' Trust was formed in 1963, Gill and Peter were founder members. They were active supporters for the rest of their lives, serving on the Trust's Council, the Conservation and Research Committee, leading walks and giving talks, and joining in the mediaeval fairs and many other fund-raising activities. Gill and Peter were both also members of the Northamptonshire Natural History Society, and each served a term as President. They were

also members of the Kettering and District Natural History Society. They each gave numerous talks to both societies. These were not confined to natural history, as they also shared interests in archaeology, and were both active members of the Wellingborough Archaeology Society. Gill was also a member of the Wildflower Society for many years. In her early life, Gill found the time and skill to play the violin in the Wellingborough Orchestra.

Gill was instrumental in leading the Kettering and District Natural History Society in producing *The Flora of Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough* (1995), with Rob Wilson and numerous other members. They went on to produce a much extended second edition in 2012. She also published numerous articles on botanical topics with various other societies.

Gill led several wildlife holidays in the West Country in the 1970s, often with Peter; and also in Turkey and the Mediterranean for Gullivers Travels. These were not the only times they botanised in foreign climes; they also enjoyed trips through the desert in Kuwait, while visiting their daughter Caroline and her family.

Gill also taught Botany at several Wildflower Weekend Courses at Knuston Hall Education Centre.

Gill's mobility decreased with age, but her mind remained sharp almost to the end, when she eventually succumbed to the passing years, dying at 91 years old on 15th October 2018. Her funeral service was a non-religious ceremony held in the new Nene Valley Crematorium in Wellingborough. On leaving we were invited to take some packets of wildflower seeds to spread around (in places where they would not confuse the issue for future recorders!). Then we gathered again at the nearby Miller public house to share memories of Gill and to stoke up for the journey home. As we came out from Gill's funeral service we were looking out over a part of the Nene Valley where Gill had done much botanical recording throughout her life. We were joined by a Red Kite which was soaring low around those who were celebrating her life for some time. Gill would have loved that.

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Seán Karley