

## OBITUARIES

## JOSEPH KENNETH BUTLER (1939–2017)

Ken Butler, as he was known to all, was one of the select number of BSBI members who have served as Vice-County Recorder for two areas, East Sutherland (v.c.107) and Caithness (v.c.109); he also recorded extensively in the eastern parts of West Sutherland (v.c.108).

Ken was born on 14th May 1939 in Warrington, the second child of Joseph and Elizabeth, but a month later the family moved to Crewe, where his father worked for Rolls Royce. They returned to Warrington six years later, where Ken later attended Boteler Grammar School. He was an attentive pupil who, out of school, enjoyed cricket and football, played clarinet and trumpet (latterly in the local brass band) and showed an early aptitude for electronics, building a two valve amplifier/record player.

After leaving school, he joined the Atomic Energy Authority at Dounreay in 1957 as an Assistant Experimental Officer, later acquiring an HNC at Robert Gordon's Technical College in Aberdeen and an Honours degree in Applied Physics at the City University in London. He enjoyed outdoor pursuits such as mountaineering and climbing (he was one of three who made the first climb of the Great Stack at Duncansby in 1958), and developed what became a life-long interest in higher plants.

Ken met Sheila Sutherland, who was also employed at Dounreay, in 1958, at a dance in Thurso Town Hall and they were married in 1960. Son Kevin was born in 1961 and daughter Karen in 1964. In 1983 they bought a ruin at Thurso East, later restored as Seaside Cottage, where they maintained complementary gardens. Here Sheila developed her skills as a flower arranger and painter and they entertained family (including, eventually, four grandchildren), friends and colleagues from all over the world.

Ken worked his way up at Dounreay to the level of Assistant Director, retiring in 2001. He was held in high regard by his colleagues, having earned a reputation for team working, measured calm and unflappability, with modesty balanced by underlying determination. More can be found on his distinguished career in a tribute by Bill Mowat on the Caithness website ([http://](http://community.caithness.org/article.php?id=5875)

[community.caithness.org/article.php?id=5875](http://community.caithness.org/article.php?id=5875)). In his scarce spare time, he served for some 25 years as an Auxiliary Coastguard at Scrabster and was a popular speaker with local branches of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute and other organisations; he was also an accomplished cook.

Ken's interest in the natural world was encouraged by membership, in his teens, of the Warrington Field Club. He started seriously recording higher plants in the late 1960s and developed his skills and interests in the 1970s, using a customised computer programme.

He served as Vice-County Recorder for East Sutherland (v.c.107) 1980–1996, much of the time in partnership with Morven Murray of Rogart, after they had met at a Golspie field meeting in 1983. The BSBI database (DDb) has some 8,600 records from East Sutherland made or compiled by him. In 1996 he took over from Neil Batchelor as Vice-County Recorder for Caithness (v.c.109), and the DDb has some 13,800 records from that area made or compiled by him. In all, he recorded Caithness for over 40 years and, in recognition of this exceptional service, the BSBI awarded him, on his retirement in 2014, the title of Recorder Emeritus. Sheila and he also made many recording trips west along the north coast of West Sutherland (v.c.108) over the years and the DDb has some 3,800 records of theirs from that area.

It is difficult to summarise Ken's huge contribution to knowledge of the plant-life of the North Highlands, the more so since he did not publish a huge amount in hard copy (but see below). There are brief notes in *Watsonia* on East Sutherland plants (1984a, 1984b), a paper with John Trist on *Puccinellia distans* ssp. *borealis* (1995), one on *Saxifraga hirculus* (2004) and another with Chris Page and Heather McHaffie on a new *Equisetum* hybrid (2007). He also contributed a chapter, with Morven Murray and Viv Halcrow, to the *Wildlife of Rogart* (2007).

The following records illustrate the scope of his many discoveries in the three vice-counties he botanised: *Polypodium* × *mantoniae* (Hybrid Polypody, Latheron, 1984) *Ranunculus flammula* ssp. *minimus* (Lesser Spearwort, Holborn Hill, 2001); *Stellaria palustris* (Marsh

Stitchwort, west of Halkirk, 2009) and *Scutellaria minor* (Lesser Skullcap, Melvich, 2013). He monitored the Caithness populations of two rare grasses *Calamagrostis scotica* (Scottish Small-reed) and *C. stricta* (Narrow Small-reed), the rare sedge *Carex recta* (Estuarine Sedge) and also *Juniperus communis* (Juniper) across the county.

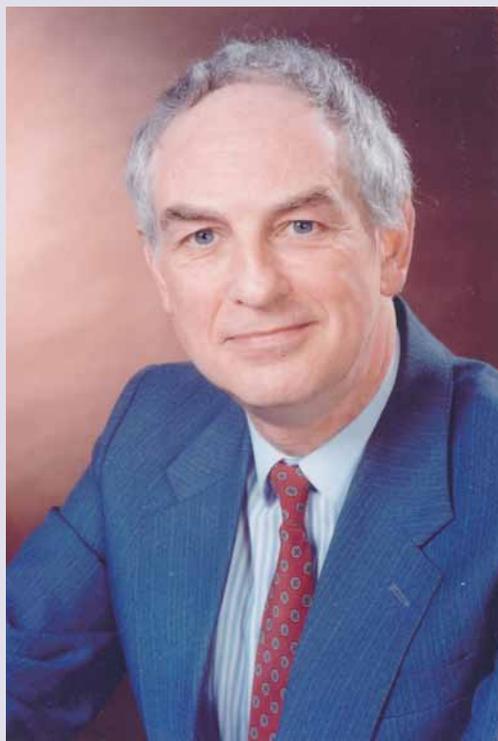
In 2008, he was working on an ambitious Rare Plant Register for Caithness, and had at that time completed the entries for first 100 species. Although illness intervened, he was, happily, able to complete this work, which was published online by the BSBI in 2015, under the title *The Rare and Scarce Plants of Caithness*. It runs to 185 pages and encapsulates most of what he had learned about the botany of the county.

The first 16 pages provide a detailed introduction to Geology and Soils, Climate, History of the Land, Vegetation and Places. The last section is what he describes as ‘my personal review’ of the main sites of botanical interest, in four major habitat categories, with monad grid references and lists of important species. Detailed accounts for some 159 taxa follow, in systematic order, with historical and current records and much other information. Included are some species now thought to be extinct in the county, such as *Oxytropis halleri* (Purple Oxytropis), happily still locally abundant further west on the north coast of Sutherland.

A couple of years previously Ken had completed a complementary catalogue on *The axiophytes and habitats in Caithness*, published on-line by the BSBI in 2013. With these two works and records from the DDb, future generations of botanists in Caithness have all the information they need to take his work forward.

Ken deployed widely in Caithness the botanical expertise and knowledge of wildlife habitats derived from his fieldwork. He was a founder member of the Caithness Field Club, contributed extensively to its online *Bulletin* from 1984 onwards and was later its Editor. Examples of his output are notes on *The vegetation of the Isle of Stroma* (1979), *Biological Recording in Caithness* (2002) and a *Plants in Caithness Index*. He also represented the Club on the working group for the *Caithness Biodiversity Action Plan* (2003) and made a major contribution to the habitat descriptions and recommendations contained in that document.

As one of the few Plantlife members in Caithness, Ken was an obvious candidate for the local management



Ken Butler.

group set up in 1999 to oversee the development of that organisation’s peatland reserve at Munsary. ‘Ken contributed hugely to our work at Munsary,’ recalls Michael Scott, who chairs the management group. ‘Not only did he bring huge botanical expertise, but also lots of valuable local contacts. He was full of ideas for the future of the reserve, but also contributed expertise from his time as Assistant Director at Dounreay; so, for example, he ensured that we had the “Rolls-Royce” of biannual risk assessment systems for the reserve.’

‘Ken was particularly excited when a survey team from the University of East London discovered *Saxifraga hirculus* (Marsh Saxifrage) in the reserve in 2002. The following year, he meticulously counted more than 1,000 flowering shoots of the plant and set up transects for ongoing monitoring of the colony. From then on, he made regular return visits to check on the health of the colony (which appears to be thriving), until his own ill health finally prevented him making the long tramp across the peatland. Today his work is continued by local volunteers, inspired and trained by Ken. For

his help at the reserve, Ken received the Plantlife Field Volunteer of the Year award in 2012.'

He was also a prime mover in the establishment of the Coronation Meadow at Dunnet, which was opened by HRH Prince Charles in August 2013.

He was a founder member of the Caithness Biodiversity Group. Mary Legg, who worked with him, describes him as being 'a major player in the Group' and 'very thorough', having 'a wonderful knowledge of the county' and being 'good at painting the bigger picture'. She also relates how he embraced technology, being the first person she saw armed with a lap-top at a meeting. She remembers 'meeting him in the Dunnet Forest with his grandchildren, who were young at the time ... playing a navigational game using GPS not long after they became available.' One of his major contributions to the work of the Group, in 2010, was the computerised mapping of biodiversity 'hot spots' in Caithness, overlaying distributional data for habitats of interest and seven plant and animal groups.

However, his crowning achievement in fostering and encouraging interest in the natural world was his book on the *Wild Flowers of the North Highlands of Scotland*, published by Birlinn in 2009. It is illustrated with a magnificent series of photographs by Ken Crossan, and has a foreword by HRH Prince Charles. It covers not only Caithness, but also the whole of Sutherland and parts of Easter Ross. It has a really useful chapter on the geographical, geological, climatic and historical context of this large area, followed by ones on five categories of habitat, the sea coast, peatlands, woodlands, grasslands and uplands, waysides and farmland. These habitat chapters are lavishly illustrated with photographs of landscapes, vegetation, and both characteristic and unusual species. There are notes on the identification of some 'difficult' taxa, such as *Carex recta* (Estuarine Sedge), *C. aquatilis* (Water Sedge) and their hybrid, but the book does not neglect the commonest wild flowers. Ken's text is a very happy mix of the general and the specific, based on his lifetime's experience and love of the area and its flowers. It was reprinted with some minor revisions in 2013 and it is to be hoped that it will be kept in print, since it is without equal as an introduction to the flora of the north of Scotland.

Ken made a remarkable recovery from the debilitating effects of a stroke in 2011, but was

diagnosed some three years later with cancer and died at Thurso on 5th October 2017.

This attempt to summarise Ken's botanical achievements, just part of a life so richly lived, is at best fragmentary. However, those interested in the wildlife of Caithness and its conservation will be ever grateful that he was able, in his 'retirement', to put so much of the fruits of his experience into the public domain.

It is fitting to conclude with a personal tribute from his friend and co-worker in East Sutherland, Morven Murray. She says 'Ken taught me all the field botany I know and all I have forgotten. He was patient, kind, never the least bit ruffled and had lots of helpful hints – who could ever forget Molly-with-the-hairy-knees [*Holcus mollis*]. Amongst other trips, I remember a very, very wet walk through a wood near Scourie for a reported *Calypso* (we didn't find it) and an August jaunt to Glenfinnan hunting *Diapensia*. We found that, in spite of driving sleet and being on top of the wrong part of the hill to begin with ... a kind fellow with a fishing rod put us right. Ken is a huge loss to us all, both for what he knew and what he was.'

I would like to thank members of Ken's family, friends, and Andy Amphlett and Jim McIntosh of the BSBI, who have helped me to put together these notes; any mistakes or omissions are mine alone.

## References

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