

Martin George, BSc, PhD, OBE (1930–2016)

Martin George was born in the Chilterns on 30th May 1930. Sadly, his father, Charles, a former Managing Director of the Light Production Company, died when Martin was only six years old, and Martin credited his love of nature to his solo excursions with his mother to the floristically rich chalk downland near his childhood home. This passion led him from Lambrook Preparatory School in Berkshire and Radley College, Oxfordshire to a BSc in Zoology, Botany and Chemistry in 1953, and subsequently a doctorate in entomology, both at the University of London (UCL). Martin's interest in ecology and the natural environment was both comprehensive and wide-ranging; he might truly be described as one of the last great naturalists of his generation.

Martin began his professional career in natural history and conservation as an Assistant Warden with the Field Studies Council at Dale Fort Field Centre, Pembrokeshire in September 1957 (Colour Section Plate 1). It was here that he met his wife Barbara (née Dresser) who was working there as a Field Assistant. In 1960 he moved to Norfolk to join the staff of the Nature Conservancy (NC) in Norwich. He was appointed Regional Officer for East Anglia in 1966 and remained with NC and its successor, the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), for a further 24 years. On his retirement in 1990, he was awarded an OBE for services to conservation.

Peter Lambley, who worked with Martin during his time at NCC and who first met him in the mid 1970s, recalls that even then, those involved with conservation and natural history were in awe of him. This was a period when many new sites were being 'found' or rediscovered, and the NCC office buzzed with enthusiasm and energy.

Rick Southwood recalls his first encounter with Martin on a misty day in 1978 at Chippenham Fen NNR where he was undertaking some contract management work. It was a damp afternoon, approaching dusk, and

he gradually became aware of a tall spectral figure draped in a long dark coat silently approaching him through the shrouding mist. Rick gripped his billhook slightly more firmly, and said 'good afternoon', whereupon Martin revealed himself as the East Anglian Regional Officer and proceeded to deliver a comprehensive introduction to the site, its position in the landscape, history, hydrology and plant and animal communities. Shortly afterwards, Martin offered Rick a full-time post working with NCC in the Broads, where he has been very happy ever since.

Martin's achievements during his long tenure at NC/NCC include his major contribution to the ground-breaking 1965 *Report on Broadland*. This was the first full account of the story of the mismanagement of the broads and rivers. It alerted the world to the threats of nutrient enrichment, algal growth, decline of water plants and sedimentation. It highlighted the damage being caused by excessive drainage and consequent ochre release and the failure of the various organisations then responsible for governing the Broads to provide a cohesive and coherent mechanism to ensure the protection of this fragile wetland ecosystem.

Report on Broadland played a key part in bringing the deterioration in water quality and wildlife in the Broads to public and government attention, and led to Martin's instrumental role in the drafting of the Broads Bill and the setting up of the Broads Authority to protect the fragile Broadland ecosystem and landscape. His subsequent involvement, alongside that of the late Andrew Lees, in launching the Broads Grazing Marsh Conservation Scheme ensured that landowners were incentivised to keep the marshland under grass and maintain high water tables, and the success of this inspired the national Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme.

During his time at NCC, Martin also designed and oversaw the implementation of

the Hoveton Great Broad Nature Trail. The trail has been used and enjoyed by countless people since it opened over 40 years ago.

Martin served the Norfolk Naturalists Trust as an *ex officio* observer at Council and as a member of many of its Committees. He held the office of President of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society in 1976/77 and delivered a Presidential Address on the issue of "Broadland's Declining Aquatic Flora and Flora".

Although Martin is most closely associated with the Broads he had a responsibility and an important influence across the East Anglian region, from the Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex coasts to the Brecks and the many rich valley fens and woodlands. Peter Lambley recalls Martin standing in front of military 'top brass' shortly after the Ministry of Defence had purchased a major extension to the Stanford Army Training Area in about 1990. As he spoke with his usual enthusiasm and conviction a barn owl made a well-timed 'fly-by' just behind him almost as though it had been summoned to appear and drive home the message. It was this combination of passion and an authority based on good science which was one of his most defining characters.

Following retirement, Martin served on the Broads Research Advisory Panel for over 20 years and was also part of the Upper Thurne Working Group, which was formed in 1999. He was a life member of the Broads Society, serving as its Chairman for many years, and representing the Society on the Broads Forum, and he continued to work through the Society to safeguard the landscape and biodiversity of the Broads for future generations.

Martin maintained an active nature conservation role throughout his retirement, publishing, in 1992, *The Broads: The Land Use, Ecology and Conservation of Broadland*, a comprehensive, detailed, and yet very readable treatise. He was awarded the Sydney Long Memorial Medal in 1995 for his outstanding services to the conservation of Norfolk's natural heritage over 35 years. Over the subsequent 20 years, he continued to research local issues and threats to the fragile Broadland ecosystem and

landscape, including the potential impacts of coastal erosion, tidal incursion and, most recently, the very complex ecology of the Upper Thurne broads, completing the *History and Ecology of the Hickling Nature Reserve* just before his death. This is to be published by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust as part of their 90th 'birthday' celebrations.

In addition to his many other interests, Martin was a keen botanist (Colour Section Plate 1) and can be credited with re-finding Fen Orchid *Liparis loeselii* at Sutton after it had been thought lost. He moored the boat and took off through the reed swamp using his botanical instinct to make his way through the reeds until he came across a lovely piece of fen and thus found the colony.

Martin joined the BSBI in 1990 and remained a member until his death. Each year from 1999 to 2015 he collected samples of seeds for storage in the Kew Millennium Seedbank, focusing mainly on the Norfolk flora and including most of the wetland plant species of the Broads. As a principal collector for Kew, his inputs helped ensure that the county and its flora is well-represented in this internationally important genetic archive.

In 2014, Martin was received a Special Achievement Award from the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership for his inspirational contribution to our understanding of the Broads and his work to safeguard them for posterity. It is notable that this award was not the one he was originally nominated for but one which the organisers subsequently created especially for the occasion, in recognition of his very special contribution to biodiversity in Norfolk. Although by then Martin was very ill, he nevertheless not only attended the awards ceremony but gave a characteristically rousing address to a large audience. In the words of his good friend, Professor Tim O'Riordan, he enjoyed that rare skill of being knowledgeable yet amusing, painstakingly detailed yet riveting. His love and understanding of natural history was up with the great English naturalists such as Gilbert White of Selbourne, and Max Nicholson, his hero and former Director General of the Nature Conservancy.

Martin was an excellent and enthusiastic communicator, innovator and educator, and during his time in Norfolk, he was a source of enormous help and inspiration to a very large number of people, both young and old, from family (three of his four children went on to work in the field of natural sciences) and former colleagues, to students; and successive generations of ecologists who still work in the conservation sector in this region, including many who themselves have had a key role in influencing and educating others; and he continued actively advising, mentoring and writing almost up until the time of his death.

Martin died peacefully of cancer, following a long illness, at his home at Marsh House, Strumpshaw, overlooking the Broadland landscape he loved, on 5th June 2016, shortly after his 86th birthday.

Martin George is one of those few individuals, along with Ted Ellis, Andrew Lees, Joyce Lambert, Brian Moss and Aitken Clark, who made an enormous contribution to our understanding of the special wetland which is the Broads, or have played a very significant role in safeguarding it for posterity. Martin is perhaps unique in having done both. He will be very greatly missed, but his infectious enthusiasm for natural history has created a

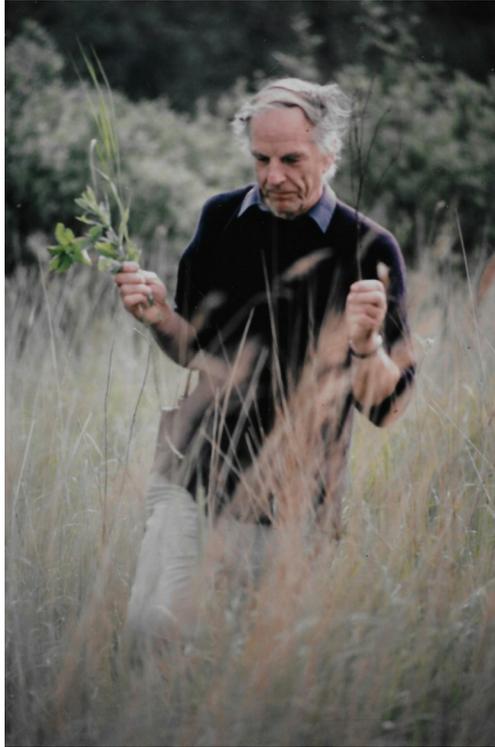
legacy in the region which will endure through the people, projects and places that he has influenced over the many years he lived and worked here.

In compiling this obituary I have made use of various tributes and the personal recollections of Tim O’Riordan, Rick Southwood and Peter Lambley. My own memories of Martin date from the early 1990s, and form what proved only a tiny facet of a remarkable naturalist, family man and friend. My thanks go to Martin’s family for kind permission to publish the images.

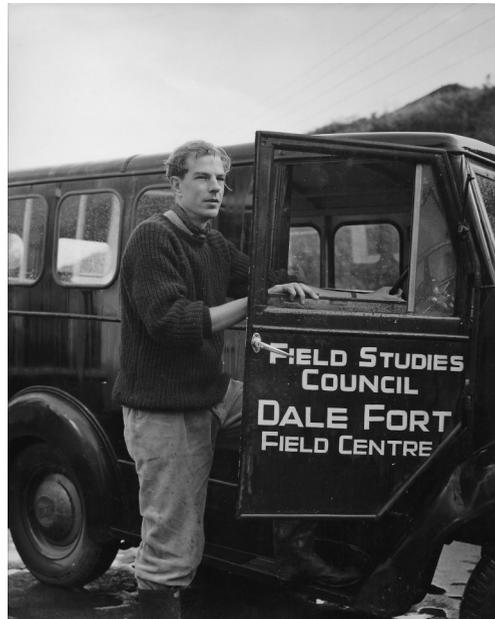
References:

- NATURE CONSERVANCY (1965). *Report on Broadland*. HMSO, London.
- GEORGE, M. (1977). ‘The decline in Broadland’s aquatic fauna and flora: a review of the present position’. *Transactions of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists’ Society* **24** (2): 41–53.
- GEORGE, M. (1992). *The Broads: The land use, ecology and conservation of Broadland*. Packard Publishing, Chichester.
- GEORGE, M. (in press). *History and ecology of the Hickling Nature Reserve*. Norfolk Wildlife Trust.

JO PARMENTER



Martin George botanising in Broadland, summer 1988



Martin George at Dale Fort, Pembrokeshire, in 1958