
PHILIP JOHN MORTON NETHERCOTT

(1918–2011)

Mr Nethercott (and how few of us could refer to him by his first name?) joined the BSBI in 1957. Following the death of E.F. Warburg in 1966, and until 2006 he was the Society's referee for *Sorbus*, the whitebeams, a remarkable collection of which occur in the Avon Gorge, a short walk from where he lived and worked as a solicitor.

On the provincial stage in Bristol, where he was born, he was the Treasurer of the Bristol Naturalists' Society from 1958 to 1992, and he was prominent in the Botanical Section, leading about fifty field meetings. An extended obituary of Mr Nethercott as a servant of that Society and as a naturalist has appeared in the 2010 edition of *Nature in Avon* (70: 95–102). The fates of any plant collections and notebooks and of his botanical library are unknown.

He appears to have become interested in *Sorbus* following the publication of Clapham, Tutin and Warburg's inspirational *Flora of the British Isles* (1952). In a letter dated November 1956, a fellow Bristol Naturalist wrote to Noel Sandwith, the Kew botanist and co-author with his mother of the annual *Bristol Botany* report, and gave them some localities in Leigh Woods which had been confirmed by Dr Warburg: "in Quarry 3 ... *Sorbus eminens*, *S. porrigentiformis*, *S. bristoliensis* and *S. aria* rub shoulders together". He added, "Mr Nethercott (he is a member of the BNS whom I know by sight but never before by name) has also submitted samples of *S. porrigentiformis* and *S. eminens* from the Glos side for Dr Warburg's approval and had them passed".

Mr Nethercott had the interests of conservation at heart but perhaps in the sense of preserving the historical connections of plants and places. For instance, in 1984 he led a 350th anniversary walk near Bristol following in the footsteps of Thomas Johnson, the apothecary responsible for the updating of Gerard's *Herbal*: some of the plants Johnson had recorded were shown to be still present.

On learning that the BSBI intended to publish a poster showing some twenty of Britain's rarest plants and fearing that it would stimulate inflated curiosity (as he put it) he expressed his views on the conservation of British rare plants in the May 1974 edition of *BSBI News*: "Not all wild flower students can be trusted to refrain from collecting, nor, worse still, from broadcasting indiscriminately among friends information where such rarities are." Indeed, he went on to suggest that the stocks of the poster should be destroyed. The response from the BSBI's Conservation Committee was immediate and firm: "these flowers are endangered ... this is an important message that the BSBI must continue to pursue with undiminished vigour."

Despite his scholarly – or perhaps, bookish – manner, he published little: in 1998 there appeared a few pages on the conservation status of *Sorbus* in the Avon Gorge, issued after a conference at Kew covering the subject from a national perspective at which he had spoken. It was entirely in character that he described to the attentive listeners the population size of *Sorbus wilmottiana* as "x, where x represents a very small number indeed".

What did he make of the monograph of British *Sorbus* published in 2010 with its greatly extended list? He was well aware of unnamed variation in the various whitebeam populations but also had his opinion that not all variants were worth naming. He had once shown Dr Warburg fresh specimens of plants resembling *Sorbus eminens* from Cheddar, but they were not confirmed. In deferring to Warburg's taxonomy as he continued to do, he was left wondering if they were therefore a distinct species. Libby Houston, who described to me a visit Mr Nethercott once made to her house when she showed him some of her (then) putative new species (some of which he appeared reasonably convinced by), suggests that it probably was *S. eminens* –

which turns out to be rather common at Cheddar – after all.

A comparison with the botanist Thomas Bruges Flower (1816-1899) of Bath and Clifton, himself something of a successful discriminator of the whitebeams of the Avon Gorge, is almost inevitable. J.W. White, the author of the *Flora of Bristol* (1912) described Flower as “punctilious, precise and extremely neat” and “singularly wary and cautious, evading ... any kind of cross examination”. So too it was with Mr Nethercott. Interested visitors were taken around Leigh Woods, and

armed with a sheet of leaf prints they were introduced to the diversity of the whitebeams as then accepted; but they did not wholly succeed in marking the sites accurately on maps.

Thus it took me many years to relocate *S. ×thuringiaca*, the natural hybrid of *S. aria* and *S. aucuparia* which he had shown me on our first meeting in 1977. And it was to that place, as if *in memoriam*, I returned by chance on Saturday 9 July 2011, the day Mr Nethercott passed away.

CLIVE LOVATT



Mr P.J.M. Nethercott (r)