

PETER DEREK SELL

(1929 – 2013)

Peter Sell, who died on 10 October 2013, was one of the most productive of the post-war generation of plant taxonomists in Britain and Ireland, and one who possessed as detailed a knowledge of our critical genera as any of his contemporaries (see Colour Section, Plate 1). Although Peter rarely left Cambridge in recent years because of ill health and a determination to finish his *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland* at all costs, and so may not have been known personally to many BSBI members, he remained until his death the very considerable and significant presence for botanists in Britain and abroad that he had been for many decades.

He was born on 1 November 1929 in Ealing but soon moved to his ancestral village of Bassingbourn in south-west Cambridgeshire, where he was brought up in their farming family by his mother Olive Sell, his Uncle Maurice and initially his maternal grandmother. His uncle in particular fostered Peter's intense interest in natural history and in farming on country walks, and this early experience of plants in relation to agriculture and landscape history was to have a growing influence on his understanding of plant taxonomy, variation and distribution. Even before he went to the village school his grandmother had taught him to read fluently. When he left school at 13 his headmaster, Arthur Harcourt, asked Peter what he wanted to do in life, and when Peter replied 'To be a zoologist', he approached the Cambridge University Professor of Zoology to ask whether he had a vacancy for a bright local boy to work as a trainee assistant. Fortunately for us the Professor had nothing to offer, and after Harcourt had asked Peter 'Would Botany do?', he was deflected to that department. Peter started work on 2 January 1944 and was based there for the rest of his career, apart from an interruption for National Service in 1948-1949. The professor at the time, F. T. Brooks, was sufficiently impressed by Peter's

abilities to pay for him to be taught Latin out of his own pocket. He became Herbarium Assistant, under Max Walters as Curator, and had additionally as mentors other major Cambridge botanical figures of the time such as Humphrey Gilbert-Carter, John Corner, Alex Watt and Harry Godwin. Student excursions led by these last two, which Peter helped with, were especially formative. Throughout his life, Peter remained grateful for the generous welcome into the academic community that he had received in these early years. Most unusually for a technical Assistant at that time, in 1973 he was appointed Assistant Curator of the herbarium and so joined the academic staff and was awarded an MA (Cantab.). (Gina Murrell, see below, later made the same transition.) Peter had a brief marriage in 1960, and then with his son Tim lived in Bassingbourn with his mother. In 2000 he moved to Histon to live with Tim and his family, and a couple of years later moved with them to Blinco Grove in Cambridge.

Peter's first serious involvement with an apomictic group was in 1954 when, after the death of W. C. R. Watson, he and J. E. Woodhead were asked to prepare for publication Watson's chaotic manuscript of his *Handbook of the Rubi of Great Britain and Ireland*; this task was rewarded by Honorary Membership of the Linnean Society. He also encouraged and worked with Beverley Miles on *Rubus* until the latter's untimely death in 1970. His major concern though was with *Hieracium*. He chose the genus as a sufficiently challenging critical one to work seriously on in 1950 after his return from doing National Service, and he almost immediately teamed up with Cyril West, a professional plant physiologist with a long interest in Hawkweeds. They worked together for over 30 years. Peter travelled throughout Britain and Ireland to study the genus in the field, made extensive collections and grew many plants in the Cambridge Botanic

Garden, where they could be studied through the year. His companions on the more important of these expeditions in the early years, studying Hawkweeds and other genera, included David Webb, Roy Clapham, Tom Tutin, Max Walters, Donald Pigott and Tyge Böcher in Ireland in 1952; Charles and John Raven, Dick Burges and Philip Oswald in Wales and England in 1953; and Norman Douglas Simpson and Cyril West in Scotland in 1959. Archie Kenneth, Brian Golding, Eric George, Ursula Duncan, David Coombe, Gigi Crompton and Caroline Pannell were among many of his other significant field companions. Although Peter joined the BSBI in 1952, he did not in general throughout his life take part in organised field meetings, as he preferred to botanise with like-minded companions who would tolerate his extensive scrutinising and note-taking of the plants he encountered. He was made an Honorary Member of the Society in 1997.

Peter was involved with the *Flora Europaea* project from an early stage in the 1960s, chiefly in preparing the indexes to each volume. This was an unusually complex and demanding task, as in order to save space the majority of synonyms did not appear in the text but were referred to the relevant species by number; the potential for error was immense, especially as in those pre-computer days it all had to be done with index cards in a great hurry at a late stage in the production of each volume, but Peter coped brilliantly. He also wrote most of the Compositae subfamily Cichorioideae, comprising nearly a quarter of Volume 4 of the *Flora*, including collaborations with Bob Finch on *Leontodon*, with John Richards on *Taraxacum* and with Cyril West on *Hieracium* (with which they were compelled by the Editorial Committee to include *Pilosella*). This last account earned him the special respect of Continental taxonomists, notably Hermann Merxmüller.

As the *Flora Europaea* project was drawing to a close in the late 1970s, four taxonomists, David Valentine, one of its editors, Arthur Chater, one of its Research Associates, along with Clive Stace and Peter Sell, planned to embark on a multi-volume *Critical Flora of*

Great Britain and Ireland. This was to cover all infraspecific variation, giving very full descriptions, genetical and ecological information and perhaps even further accessory details akin to those in the Biological Flora accounts. When the project's application for funding was rejected and it was abandoned, Stace and Sell set about writing more purely descriptive Floras of their own representing opposite ends of the spectrum, Stace's going down in general only as far as subspecies and giving fairly short descriptions, Sell's covering all infraspecific taxa as well as all the apomictic species and giving much longer descriptions. Infraspecific taxa, especially those below the rank of subspecies, had been largely ignored by the authors of British Floras since the 1930s. Peter invited Gina Murrell, his colleague in the herbarium since 1966, to join him as co-author and together, as well as writing descriptions and keys in the herbarium, they continued field expeditions and collecting, especially on the East Anglian coast, describing in the field characters that would be lost in the herbarium. The planned five volumes of the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland* began to appear in reverse order, beginning with the Monocots in 1997. Peter believed that correct identification depended on reference to as many characters of a taxon as possible. He refused to use the diagnostic formula 'like Species x but ..' (except when bullied by the *Flora Europaea* editors), and seemed unaware that the ordinary botanist did not have his ability to carry two long descriptions in mind simultaneously and work out which best applied to the plant in question. Conversely, his ability to recognize at sight differences between closely related infraspecific taxa or apomicts was remarkable, and there are stories of his identifying Hawkweed or Elm specimens, sometimes upside-down, at a glance from the other end of the herbarium.

In writing the *Flora*, Peter was able to summarise years of fieldwork and herbarium studies of the genera he had long been interested in, such as *Fumaria*, *Sorbus*, *Suaeda* and *Tripleurospermum*, and of course *Hieracium* and *Pilosella*. However he also looked afresh at numerous genera which he had not hitherto

studied in such detail, for example *Chenopodium*, *Conyza*, *Polygonum* and *Rumex*. He tackled these weedy species by regularly visiting particular sites in and around Cambridge, including waste and disturbed sites in the Botanic Garden, mostly on a weekly or even daily basis. A constant that he relied on was his weekly walks on Saturdays for over forty years with his great friend Bill Robinson around Bassingbourn, as well as weekly walks around Histon with Brian and Rosemary Chapman during the two years he lived there, familiarising himself with every aspect of variation and hybridisation. There is no doubt that although the *Flora* is as a result somewhat Cambridge-centred, it is a great step forward in the description and understanding of British plants. After the first three volumes had been published, and when the last two volumes had been largely written though not finalised, Gina Murrell accepted severance from the University at the end of 2011, at the same time retiring from the project. The completion of the two unpublished volumes was taken on by four of Peter's friends. Peter did not use a computer and had been entirely reliant on Gina for the typing and processing, and Gwynn Ellis typed the whole of Volume 2 and is coping with the processing of Volume 1 and the incorporation of all the corrections. Philip Oswald, Chris Preston and Arthur Chater have been reading and correcting the text, and Sarah Holme has done the remaining illustrations. These final two volumes are currently being prepared for publication, and the five volumes of the complete work will have covered some 4,946 species and a total of 8,963 taxa at all ranks.

Two of Peter's main insights had special relevance beyond taxonomy. He was convinced, quoting Arthur Tansley's remarks in the preface to *The British Islands and their Vegetation* (1939), that it was not reasonable to talk about the ecology and other aspects of the biology of a species if there were infraspecific taxa involved; the differences between the ecology of, for example, subspecies or varieties within a species were often greater than that between the ecology of two distinct species. He was baffled and dismayed that this was so

generally ignored, even in the Biological Flora accounts and in the descriptions of NVC communities, and most importantly in so much conservation work. The other insight concerned what he and Oliver Rackham called 'look-alikes', and was related to this. Many plants, especially in hedges and other synanthropic situations, which are normally considered to be native species, turn out on careful inspection to be closely related species or infraspecific taxa of alien origin (*BSBI News* **105**: 24-30 (2007)). Again, the consequences for conservation, distribution studies and historical ecology are considerable.

Those who did not know Peter personally could find it frustratingly difficult to engage him with their problems. He always maintained that civil servants were obliged to answer letters, but that as a university employee he had no such obligation, and he would, depending on circumstances, frequently fend off or even ignore enquiries and requests for identifications. He often quoted John Corner's view that people who did small things would never do the large ones. However, once he was engaged in a project he was always exceptionally generous in making the information he had collected available to others, and his sole concern was that work should be done properly, rather than that he should obtain personal credit. He held strong views on a wide range of subjects and would argue his points forcibly, but he had a remarkable ability to disagree with people without upsetting them, and discussions would usually end in laughter (unless he was distracted in mid-argument by the sight of an attractive woman). He completely avoided any sort of academic politics and committees, and appeared to be immune to setbacks, such as the collapse of the *Critical Flora* project, the rejection by the *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society* of the series of papers describing numerous new Elm species that he was writing with Jayne Armstrong, and Gina Murrell's regretful retirement from the *Flora* in 2011; he simply continued working on what he thought was needed. In recent years, although still invariably helpful to others when cornered, his overriding concern was to

get the *Flora* written at all costs and he completely refused to get side-tracked, and so did not act as referee for the many genera he knew so well. Although he would not have said it in so many words, he undoubtedly felt that he was probably the only person left who could write the book that he was writing.

Peter estimated that his collections in total amounted to some 30,000 numbers, comprising about 50,000 specimens, a considerable proportion of them in collaboration with Gina Murrell. He made European collections as well as British: from Austria in 1955; from the south of Spain with Frank Harrup in 1957; from Malta with Brian Golding in 1958; from Austria and Slovakia in 1963; from the south of France (especially the Alpes Maritimes) and northern Italy with a Cambridge Botany School party in 1965; from northern Yugoslavia with Max Walters, Gigi Crompton, Frank Perring and Charles Turner in 1967; and from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy, Switzerland and France on a car trip with Charles Turner in 1971 when they met up with a Botany School excursion in Montenegro led by Max Walters.

Peter always said that an essential element in all of his taxonomic projects was the long bench in the middle of the Cambridge herbarium, on which he could arrange up to 60 or so specimens and compare them by eye, rearranging them as necessary and so working out their relationships. The taxonomists he most admired included J. E. Dandy and W. T. Stearn, and H. W. Pugsley especially for his monographs of *Fumaria* and *Hieracium*. The cladistic approach did not appeal to him, but the significance of the recent developments in DNA studies certainly did, and he regretted that the preparation of his *Flora* was too advanced to take advantage of it by the time it was widely available.

In addition to the *Flora*, works that Peter co-authored included *A Flora of Cambridgeshire* with Frank Perring, Max Walters and Harold Whitehouse (1964) and *A Flora of the Maltese Islands* with Sylvia Haslam and Pat Wolseley (1977). He assisted Frank Perring in editing the *Critical Supplement to the Atlas of the British Flora* (1968); and he wrote

Lapsana, *Hieracium* and *Pilosella* in the Compositae volume of *Flora of Turkey* (1975). (The thoroughness with which he had tackled the account of Turkish *Lapsana* only became clear when Edgar Milne-Redhead (*B.S.B.I. News* 20: 24 (1978)) inadvicely poured scorn on his decision to reduce *L. intermedia* to a subspecies of *L. communis*; Peter in his response (*Watsonia* 13: 299-302 (1981)) revealed the vast amount of material and investigation on which he had based this conclusion.) Amongst non-botanical papers that he wrote for *Nature in Cambridgeshire* were one on the changes in agriculture and wildlife in Bassingbourn in 1989 and three on the vertebrates of Bassingbourn and Kneesworth in 1966, 1967 and 1968. A book on the history of Bassingbourn was planned and was the next work on his list when he died. He was the shooting tenant of Hayley Wood for a time and prided himself on being an expert shot. In his youth he was a highly competent cricketer and soccer player, and in the early years of his employment he cycled the 15 miles from Bassingbourn every day. Birdwatching was his favourite leisure activity, especially on the East Anglia coast.

Peter was an acute judge of botanical ability in others. Reputation and paper qualifications meant nothing to him; what was important was whether someone had 'flair', his term for an indefinable combination of instinct, energy and hard work that he himself of course exemplified so well. When he recognized this quality in a student or colleague he would go to very generous lengths to teach, advise and encourage him or her, whether it was how best to set about writing descriptions, methods of collecting and pressing, the intricacies of nomenclature or the finer points of typification. He was also an outstanding writer of obituaries.

Peter's retirement party in October 1997 was attended by many friends and colleagues and by the Vice-Chancellor, but most touchingly by the headmaster who had seen his potential and got him his first job in the University. Peter was described as the longest-serving member of staff of the university in recent times. Perhaps the best evocation of his

character is the version published in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* (1998) of the speech that he gave on this occasion. Increasing ill health in the 1990s, including two heart attacks and attendant operations, failed to slow him down significantly. He went to live with, and was looked after by, his son Tim and his family, and thanks to them and to Gina Murrell both his home and his working lives were made comfortable and immensely productive. He died on 10 October 2013 as he was being taken to hospital after another heart attack. After a funeral service in Bassingbourn parish church on 7 November he was buried alongside his mother in the village cemetery. Amongst the flowers on his coffin was a

bunch of *Hieracium grandidens*, gathered from a colony at Hafod which he had himself seen on a visit to Cardiganshire.

We are grateful to several others for information about Peter's life, especially Philip Oswald, Gina Murrell and Tim Sell. It is expected that a bibliography of his publications will appear on the BSBI website in due course. In the meantime, the articles in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* can be read at <http://www.natureincambridgeshire.org.uk/issues.htm>

ARTHUR CHATER & CHRIS D. PRESTON



Peter Sell, Cambridge, 2011.
Photo © Philip Oswald



Peter Sell, Hafod, v.c.46, 1978.
Photo by Arthur Chater