

Peter Derek Sell (1929–2013)

Peter Sell, who worked in the Herbarium of the Botany Department (later Plant Sciences) for 53 years and made major contributions to plant taxonomy for the county, the country and the continent of Europe, was a man of many talents. He was exceptional not only in the rigour of his taxonomic work and his determination to write accounts based on newly collected plant material rather than the accounts of others, but also in the thoroughness of his all-round knowledge of natural history, his understanding of the countryside and ‘how it works’, and his deep interest in fundamental academic questions such as ‘What is a species?’. He was also a crack shot and, as a young man, a highly competitive and gifted footballer and cricketer.

Peter grew up in the village of Bassingbourn at the south-western edge of Cambridgeshire, where he developed at an early age his love of the countryside and the creatures in it. In his retirement speech on leaving the Plant Sciences Department in October 1997 (*N. in C.* **40**: 79–82) he recalled how the Headmaster of the village’s Council School, Arthur Harcourt (remarkably present, in his 90th year), asked the University Professor of Zoology if there might be a place for which Peter could apply. Luckily for Botany there wasn’t, but Arthur Gray, the technician in the Herbarium of the Botany Department, was soon to retire and Peter was taken on in January 1944 – when just over 14 years old – to understudy him. A year later he was left in charge of the Herbarium; there was no academic Curator at the time. The Head of the Department, Professor F. T. Brooks, not a cuddly person, recognised Peter’s talents and paid personally for him to take lessons in Latin. Peter’s speech includes an account of the various men, all characters in their own right, who guided his footsteps in the following decade, during which a Curator was appointed – Max Walters (see *N. in C.* **48**: 3–11).

By the early 1970s Peter had become one of the tiny number of experts on the taxonomy of the many species of hawkweed in the genus *Hieracium* and author of many new species, confident in his treatment of several other ‘difficult’ genera, a co-author of a new *Flora of Cambridgeshire*, a major helper in the *Atlas of the British Flora* and *Critical Supplement* projects, and an invaluable contributor to the multi-volume *Flora Europaea*, being responsible for a number of accounts of problematic genera and for putting the first three volumes through the press, including producing the very extensive indexes and checking all the intricate details in the proofs. It is no wonder that in 1973 he became one of those few individuals in the University to move from being an assistant to being a member of the academic staff. He was made Assistant Curator of the Herbarium and awarded the degree of M.A. He was yet to produce, with the support of Gina Murrell, the new *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, of which Volumes 3, 4 and 5 have been published and Volumes 1 and 2 are now being put through the press by his friends.

A detailed account of the progress of Peter’s research and writing has appeared in an obituary by Arthur Chater and Chris Preston in the *Yearbook* for 2013 of the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland, and another in his own words will form part of the Introduction to Volume 1 of the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*. In addition to all his papers and books dealing with problems conceived at the national and international scale, Peter published 20 articles in *Nature in Cambridgeshire*. These covered an extraordinarily wide spectrum from the vertebrate fauna of his home village (in three parts, in *N. in C.* **9–11**), its arable weeds (**28**: 19–23), a description of the changes there between the 1930s and the 1980s (**31**: 12–18) and glorious accounts of what he learned at all hours and in all weathers about the birdlife of Hayley Wood during his 12-year stint as the shooting tenant (**23**: 27–28; **30**: 23–25), through articles on the identification of hazels, cherries and plums, snowdrops, water-crowfoots and Wicken Fen dactylorchids (**23**: 50–53; **33**: 29–39 & **34**: 59–60; **35**: 65–66; **32**: 14–16; **29**: 69–72) and the rediscovery of Fen Ragwort (*Senecio paludosus*) in Cambridgeshire (**16**: 37), to insightful obituaries of Franklyn Perring and Peter Yeo and two trenchant book reviews.

Here I take the opportunity to mention three topics about which I know that he felt very strongly and about which he and I had many earnest conversations. First, Peter believed passionately in the practice of recognising within a species different subspecies based on morphological grounds, each associated with a different habitat within a given geographical area. This approach contrasted strongly with the view held by some taxonomists that subspecies should be recognised only for plants growing in different parts of the geographical range of a species. Peter was deeply frustrated by the failure of almost all ecologists to state which subspecies they had encountered in their descriptive or experimental studies.

Secondly, Peter believed passionately in the theory of evolution and the inevitable consequence of accepting that idea – a realisation that what we call ‘species’ have diverged and are still diverging to varying degrees. If the units called species differ from each other to varying degrees and are separated by breeding barriers to varying extents, there is no worthwhile simple answer to the question ‘How many species are there?’ in such and such a genus, in a given study area or indeed in the world.

Thirdly, Peter believed that the conservation of nature, and more broadly of the countryside, had fallen into the hands of incompetent people. In his review of the first edition of Oliver Rackham’s book *The History of the Countryside* (*N. in C.* **29**: 42–44) he wrote: “When the various Naturalists’ Trusts got going, I thought how wonderful it would be if all these places [the wonderful sites that he knew all across East Anglia] could be conserved for ever. I could not have had a greater delusion. ... the countryside needs to be managed, and to be able to do it you need to understand it.” He then praised Oliver for providing much of the necessary understanding. That was in 1987. During the following quarter of a century he became increasingly distressed by the ignorance of both taxonomy and ecology among those making decisions at a local level on conservation and ‘restoration’ of vegetation. In particular, he railed against the failure to appreciate the differences between native species (or subspecies) and the close relatives imported and planted under ignorant managers. One of his most important papers, in my view, was that entitled ‘Introduced look-alikes and other difficult introduced plants in our Cambridgeshire flora’ (*N. in C.* **48**: 46–54) published in 2006 when was 76 years old.

Peter achieved as much as he did not only because he was very talented but also because he worked very hard and was highly disciplined, not allowing himself to be distracted from the task in hand. Yet he was always stimulating to talk to and had a great sense of fun, not to mention a taste for the saucy tale. We can truly say that he will be badly missed.

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