

PETER TAYLOR

(1926–2011)

[The following obituary is edited from one that was originally contributed to the *Kew Bulletin*, with permission]

One of Kew's most talented botanists of the last century, Peter Taylor died peacefully in his sleep at his home in Kirdford, Sussex. Peter was born in Luton, Bedfordshire. On leaving school, he undertook a five-year apprenticeship as a machinist and turner in the tool-room of Commer Cars, Luton, taking evening classes to gain a National Certificate in Mechanical Engineering. His early interest in botany, particularly ferns, was encouraged by John Dony, who was writing up the Flora of Bedfordshire. His spare time was spent plant hunting on the Bedfordshire downs and elsewhere, as an active member of the BSBI. His knowledge of the British flora was encyclopaedic, a rarity nowadays amongst Kew botanists. He made a considerable and beautifully prepared herbarium of British plants, now at Kew, as well as a fine collection of butterflies.

Through John Dony he met Edgar Milne-Redhead near the end of World War II and was encouraged to join Kew, starting as a Temporary Assistant in the Herbarium in 1948, with a considerable drop in salary. His eye for a plant, craftsmanship and attention to detail made him a stalwart of the Tropical African Section. At that time entrants with a university degree were assigned to Scientific Officer grades, with much better career prospects. As an Experimental Officer, Peter Taylor was delegated to largely curatorial and technical duties, and soon gained a remarkable knowledge, particularly of the herbaceous plants of the region. His meticulous determinations and notations are prevalent throughout the rapidly growing collections of the period near the end of the colonial era. He carefully wrote up several small families for FTEA and developed a special interest in the carnivorous plant family Lentibulariaceae (bladderworts).

In late 1955 he married Shirley Patten, a scientific assistant in the Kew Herbarium. Shortly afterwards, he undertook an eleven-month expedition to East Africa with Edgar Milne-Redhead, spending six months during the rainy season in the Songea District of Tanganyika (now Tanzania). They worked very long hours, carefully arranging plants in presses late into the night, and up again at dawn mostly, seven days a week. Altogether they made 5,000 gatherings in numerous sets and used their combined knowledge of the flora to make a thorough and selective representation, particularly of the relatively neglected herbaceous component. The herbarium collections were of the highest standard, combining his considerable artistic and scientific talents. He undertook most of the non-botanical duties, liaising with the African helpers, fixing vehicles, shopping and crating specimens. Ali Omari was their skilled driver and picked up collecting techniques that he later used in the service of Mary Richards. Samuel Kibuwa (Paulo) joined the expedition from Morogoro, and Semsei was also seconded from the Forest Department for a period to help with trees. On returning to Kew he took the main responsibility for naming and distributing the collections, with duplicates distributed to a notable number of herbaria in Africa and abroad. He also took on the field notes, naming and distribution of other major Kew collectors, notably more than 20,000 numbers collected by Mary Richards.

It was not until Sir George Taylor left Kew that Peter was given long-overdue promotion to Principal Scientific Officer in 1972. George's nose had been put out, so it was said, because he kept being congratulated on Peter's work on *Utricularia*. Unfortunately Peter had been passed over to head the Fern Section and was assigned the Orchids, which he ran from 1972 until 1984. He published a popular book and many articles on orchids for the *Orchid Review*, *Die Orchidee*, the American Orchid Society *Bulletin* and *Curtis's*

Botanical Magazine. He discharged his duties conscientiously but was glad when younger members of the section could take over this specialist group and he could devote more time to *Utricularia*. He made visits to Australia and America and examined vast numbers of specimens with visits and loans. He was awarded the Kew Medal in 1990 for his services to the Royal Botanic Gardens. He continued several years after his retirement in 1986 to hone his outstanding monographic revision of the genus, each of the 214 species illustrated with his own fine drawings. The appearance of his definitive monograph of *Utricularia* coincided with his retirement from Kew in 1986.

In retirement he settled in the West Sussex Weald, where he purchased two woods that he restored to good condition through coppicing and cutting rides. In the course of the restoration, he made several new insect and plant records for the tetrad. He was particularly pleased that the Purple Emperor butterfly (*Apatura iris*) bred in one of his woods thanks to his management of it. He was also a fine entomologist and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of British Lepidoptera and other groups. He was one of the longest serving members of both the BSBI and of the Amateur Entomological Society, both of which he joined in 1946.

Peter was an outstandingly good cabinet maker and specialised in making harpsichords and clavichords to the most exacting standards of craftsmanship. His instruments have graced concert platforms, played by Margaret Hunt, the wife of his former colleague and old friend David Hunt.

Peter had an impish sense of humour, which I suffered from on several occasions. New to the Kew staff, I commissioned a watercolour of an orchid from an eminent botanical artist

for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. I was unhappy with the result and consulted Peter, who informed me that the artist "appreciated constructive criticism". Minutes later the artist appeared in the Orchid Herbarium and I duly offered her my views. A whirlwind hit me and only then did I hear Peter laughing from his seat behind a strategically-placed cupboard. I shall miss that chuckle.

Our sincere condolences go to his wife Shirley and to his children, Gilbert, Sarah and Jonathan.

I would like to thank Roger and Diana Polhill for their help in preparing this obituary.

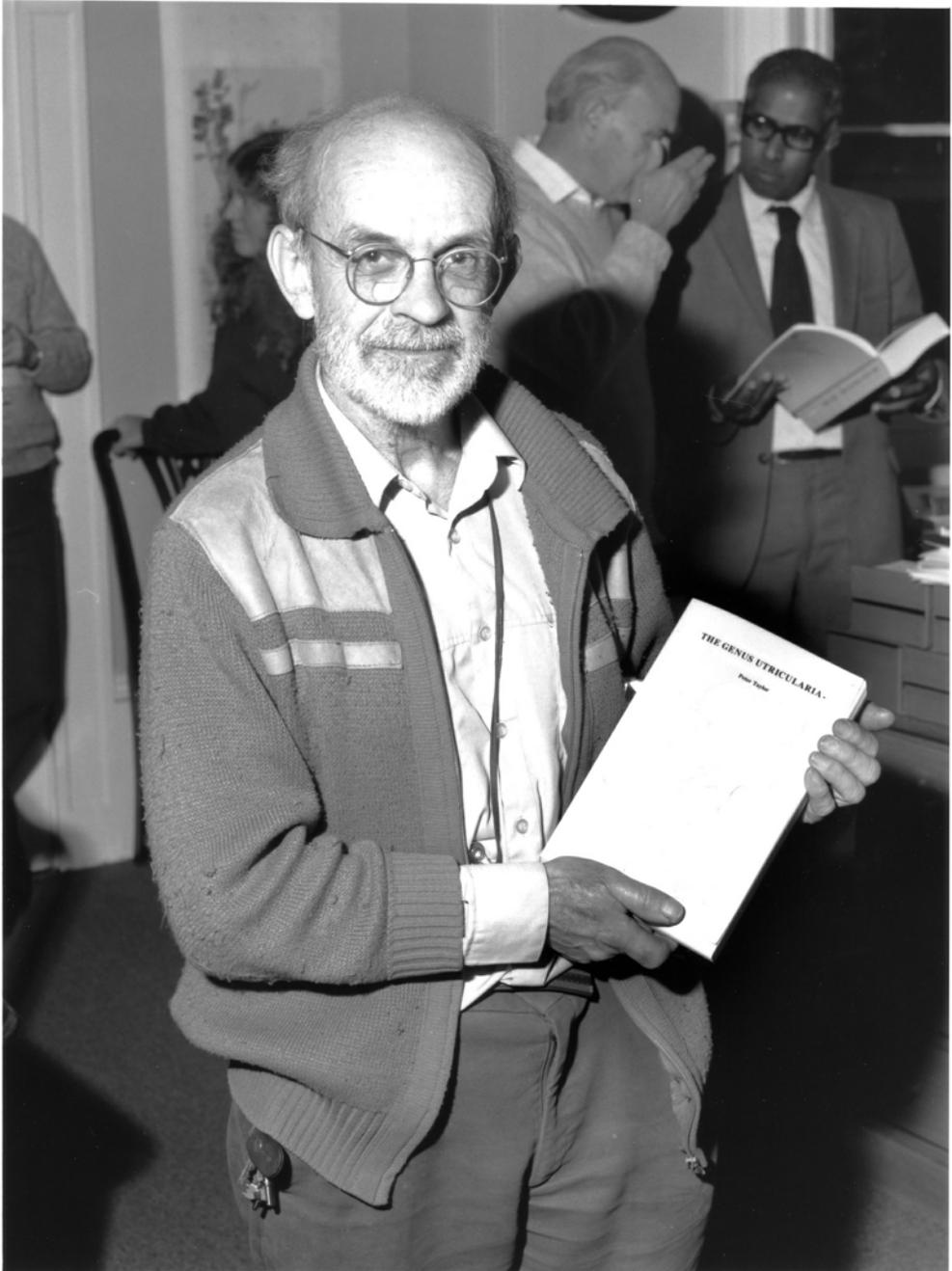
Eponymy:

Acacia taylorii Brenan & Exell (1957); *Genlisea taylorii* Eb. Fischer, S. Porembski & Barthlott (2000); *Indigofera taylorii* J.B. Gillett (1958); *Karina tayloriana* Boutique (1971); *Spermacoce taylorii* Verdc. (1975); *Utricularia tayloriana* J. Joseph & J. Mani (1983).

Selected bibliography

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PHILLIP CRIBB, Kew



Peter Taylor on the occasion of the publication of his *Utricularia* monograph 1989.
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