

Rita Isabel Hemsley (née Jeal) (1932–2016)

Rita Hemsley died suddenly on 15th February 2016, following a day's botanising, not far from her home in West Sussex. She had been, for many years, the extremely capable and efficient Hon. Gen. Sec. of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society (SBRs). She was also an avid amateur field botanist, contributing much to the society's general record gathering and recording for the Sussex Rare Plant Register, prepared by Mary Briggs in 2001, and for the forthcoming new Flora of Sussex.

Rita Isabel Hemsley was born on February 13th 1932 in Brighton, the second of two children. She attended Stanford Road Junior School, just at the onset of the Second World War. It was at this time that she became a Brownie, and a Guide, commencing a life-long association with the movement. She did contribute to the war effort when she was in the Guides, by wheeling a trolley around, knocking on doors asking for aluminium saucepans to help build spitfires....! At the end of the hostilities, she attended Varndean Grammar School, where, in later life, she worked as a Science Technician and an Audio-Visual Technician. After spending over 25 years in these roles, she found a post working at the YMCA in Brighton, and also began to manage the running of the city's Guide Shop, as one of a group of volunteers, supplying everything needed to be a member of this organisation. She continued in this role until very recently, when the shop moved to a new location, and she decided it was time to retire.

In the mid-1950s, Rita met her future husband through their joint interest in cycling, another way to spend time out in the country. She went on to have three children, Teresa, Sonia and Graeme, and, as I understand it, spent many days taking them out for long country walks and what, in Hemsley family folklore, are referred to as 'memorable picnics.'

Rita's passion for wildlife, in particular birds and plants, encouraged her to join a number of relevant organisations. The Sussex Wildlife

Trust (SWT) was one of the first, in 1980. In 1986, she joined the SBRs, gradually becoming a more regular attendee at field meetings; as her confidence grew, she began to lead them as well. It was a well-known fact that no field meeting could commence until Rita had had her coffee, and she was never slow to remind folk when she thought it was time to break for lunch. She added the Wildflower Society in 1993, and BSBI in 1995. She was also a life member of the Sussex Ornithological Society, as well as the RSPB.

In the early 1990s, when I was chairman of the Brighton Group of the SWT, Rita was not only a member, but also our secretary. Close cooperation with me and other committee members, together with her quiet efficiency, ensured we ran a smooth course. Around this time the SBRs were looking for a new Hon. Gen. Sec., and I was approached, among others, by the President, Mary Briggs, asking if I knew of anyone who might take on the role. I suggested she ask Rita, and after her 'surely there's someone better than me' initial response, she agreed, and had been in the post up to her death. She took to the role in the positive and efficient way she did to almost any task she undertook. Rita was not one to seek recognition for what she did. Her philosophy was to '*do the job properly*'. She was also a good, and willing, leader of field meetings, when we finally managed to persuade her that she was the right person to do this. Her self-deprecating approach always caused her to wonder whether there was someone better qualified.

It was not long before Rita decided to widen her horizons from botanising in the U.K. to foreign botany, and she travelled to various destinations across the globe, including the Himalaya, China, Europe and Australia. It was these last two destinations where I had the pleasure of leading tours she joined. Firstly, she came with me to Western Australia and, latterly, to Southeast France. She also travelled

with Stephen Clarkson, a WFS colleague, on several trips to the Peloponnese.

In her later life, Rita moved to the village of Ditchling, nestling under the scarp slope of the South Downs, and she was very happy and comfortable in her new surroundings, with many new areas to explore. The Rita I knew was never happier than when she was helping others or enjoying the great outdoors. I was comforted to learn, from her family, that on the

day of her death, she had been out looking at *Galanthus* species in a local churchyard. Her funeral was very well attended, with representatives from all areas of her interests, joining her family in a celebration of her life.

Rest In Peace Rita, you will be sadly missed by many.

PAUL HARMES