

STEPHANIE E. THOMSON (1925–2011)

Stephanie moved to Marden in central Herefordshire with her husband Peter in 1961. During the next 50 years she played an influential role in the study and conservation of the county's wildlife.

She also inspired great affection amongst many, as was evidenced by the crowded attendance at her funeral in Hereford on the 22nd of March 2011.

In 1976 Stephanie took over as BSBI Recorder for v.c.36 Herefordshire from Lillian Whitehead and she filled the position with distinction until she made a phased hand-over to me 4 years ago. For much of this time she was the leading light in the Herefordshire Botanical Society, organising numerous excursions and overseeing the systematic recording of the flora of Herefordshire from 1987 to 2000. This was the county's contribution to the BSBI's "*New Atlas of the British & Irish Flora*" 2002.

Mary Briggs writes:

"Stephanie was not only interested in British flora and fungi, but also in those overseas, particularly in mountain plants. When her late husband Peter was teaching they went plant-hunting high in the Dolomites and the Alps in the summer holidays. Steph with her remarkable energy and unbounded enthusiasm for searching for new species was a rewarding companion for botanical expeditions and I recall with enjoyment taking her on nineteen tours since 1980, including twice to Western Australia and to her favourite – Lapland in 1986.

Steph was always reluctant to leave 'walkabouts' with the possibilities of different plants around each corner, and at times as we assembled to depart Steph's figure would be seen nearing the skyline. Peter would be sending calls and whistles, and explaining that Steph had inherited genes from her explorer father whose collection of African insects had included

some named after him: Drake-brockmanii. On one occasion in Turkey he was explaining this to a young scientist doing research on the fishes in the local lakes, and he said "If Stephanie is a Drake-Brockman we must be cousins". And they were!"

Stephanie and Peter were also accomplished mycologists. The Woolhope Club which was founded as a natural history society for Herefordshire in the mid-19th century organised fungus forays, which at the time were nationally pre-eminent. After leading the way in the country for most of the Victorian era, fungus recording in Herefordshire almost completely faded away during the first half of the 20th century. Stephanie's earliest Herefordshire fungus records can be traced back to 1961. Ted Blackwell, who set up the Herefordshire Fungus Database attributed to Stephanie and Peter the denouement of the "dark ages of Herefordshire Fungus Recording".

Of 560,000 records held by the Hereford Biological Record Centre at the end of 2010 18% (102,000) are entered with the initials – S.E.T. (Stephanie E Thomson).

However her contribution was far greater than can be described by statistics: at the time of her funeral, when preparing my address, I received comments from over 20 local naturalists, and every one remarked upon her "sense of fun".

The other themes common among the thoughts I received were "fiercely independent", "a great teacher", "brave", "forthright", and "amazing stamina". Those who knew her would find accord with all!

It says much about Stephanie's character that, at the age of 86 – only weeks before she died – she was still delivering Meals on Wheels to her "Old Folk", just as she had done as long as anyone could remember, probably since the inception of Meals on Wheels soon after the Second World War.

No one knew the glorious Herefordshire countryside as well as Stephanie. She knew the lanes, the footpaths, the commons and woods, and perhaps of greatest value to an exploring botanist she knew so many landowners and was widely welcomed onto the farms and private estates of the county.

It was, however on the Herefordshire section of the Black Mountains where Stephanie most enjoyed her botany. She found many “lost” 19th century plants. In 1980 Stephanie and Peter found Fir Club Moss (*Huperzia selago*) in the Olchon Valley, it was not found again until Mark Jannink rediscovered it in 2009 high on a rocky ledge. My final “orders” from Steph when I went to visit her last Christmas, “Now then Peter when are you going to take me up to see the Huperzia?”

I had been stalling on this throughout 2010 because although Stephanie could walk at a remarkable pace with her two replacement hips, I balked at the thought of escorting her

over the rocks of the waterfall, and twenty feet up the rock-face, something she would undoubtedly have attempted had I taken her there to see this plant!

In 2010 she went on a residential trip to Somerset with the Ledbury Naturalist Society. She organised the “girls” to climb The Tor before breakfast while “the boys” had a lie in. On that trip she was very touched when she was presented with a pudding to celebrate her 86th birthday.

I concluded my funeral address with words from Janet Parry, one of her close friends. She told me how she could remember Stephanie at her happiest, “in a flowery meadow with a large area of Meadow Saffron and lots of friends and Millie, of course”. Millie was the last of a line of much loved spaniels.

A remarkable lady, fiercely independent, very brave and full of fun!

PETER GARNER.



Stephanie Thomson with her good friend Paul Zagni and ‘Millie’ standing on one of The Seven Sisters rocks on The Doward high above the R. Wye (v.c.36). Photo P. Garner © 2007