

Tributes to Peter Sell at the celebratory event held at the Sainsbury Laboratory and Botanic Garden, Cambridge, on 18 July 2014

Richard West's tribute

Good afternoon, botanists.

When A. C. Seward became Professor of Botany in 1906 he started keeping a daybook in which he recorded events in the Botany School. When I was appointed I thought I might learn something from his notes. One thing I read, as I recall, was his account of his first staff meeting, which included a discussion on the future of the Herbarium. One suggestion made was that it should be sent to London by train. Fortunately this did not happen, but what did happen is recorded in the Plant Sciences Centenary booklet published 10 years ago, with many distinguished taxonomists radiating from the Herbarium. Now we recognise the Herbarium as a scientific treasure of the first order.

The Herbarium emerged safely at the end of the 39/45 War, with Peter Sell starting his great career in it. Remarkably his activities of analysis and publication only concluded recently with the start of the publication of the five-volume *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, a worthy and encyclopaedic successor to the many floras with an origin in the Herbarium.

After the War, as an undergraduate and research student, I witnessed the activities of the Herbarium, which were expressed via the expertise of Max Walters, Donald Pigott and David Coombe. I soon realised that they knew personally every plant in the Kingdom, not to mention the Continent. With them was Peter Sell, who over the years made a massive and leading contribution, setting standards, contributing to research and teaching of taxonomy, and enhancing the reputation of the Herbarium.

I frequently talked with Peter, to valuable effect, often at length, about the problems of taxonomy when dealing with fossil pollen, fruits and seeds found in sediments of the Ice Age in north-west Europe, and he consulted me on the identifications, which I have to admit were a first approximation. The fact that he wanted to talk about these problems showed the width of his taxonomic interests.

With these remarks I can now leave you to hear from those who were far more closely connected with Peter and his contributions and who can speak authoritatively on his achievements.

Donald Pigott's tribute (read by Richard West)

I am sorry that I cannot be present today but I have a long-standing family commitment and a dash down and back from the Lake District is not an

option.

In the summer of 1946 the war was over and I had the good fortune to spend two weeks in the Swiss Alps. I returned with a mini-herbarium of alpine plants and, on arriving in Cambridge in October, I asked my demonstrator, none other than Max Walters, for advice on identifying them and he then introduced me simultaneously to the Herbarium, Hegi's *Flora von Mitteleuropa* and Peter: all three have remained invaluable assets during the subsequent 68 years.

Peter promptly disappeared for National Service, but on his return we discovered our shared interest in the local natural history and flora, and the British flora in general. This developed into a lifetime's friendship and twice when I left Cambridge to appointments elsewhere and after my retirement we kept in touch. In 1952 Peter and I were in our twenties, on a tour of Ireland arranged by David Webb with three other senior professors of botany, and I recall how impressed they were with Peter's energy, enthusiasm and knowledge.

Over the years I acquired a great respect, not only for his knowledge, but for his attention to detail and his accuracy of observation which he used to become expert in such critical groups as hawkweeds and to describe in detail variation within species. This knowledge led him to discover that some of the species that were being traded as native wild flowers, for the current craze for muddling up the British flora by sowing them in the wild, were in fact closely related alien species or subspecies from other parts of Europe.

In this respect, last autumn I asked Peter if he would kindly collect me seeds of the true Common Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, as those grown from seed that I had bought had slightly mauve flowers and were clearly not correct. Almost by return came a packet of seed and a detailed taxonomy of related taxa. In the past fortnight, each time I pass the patch in the garden where his seed was sown (I emphasise – **in the garden**), I enjoy seeing the pure scarlet flowers and I think of Peter.

Peter Grubb's tribute

Peter Grubb, who had published an obituary for Peter Sell in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* in 2014 (No. 56, 88–90), first recalled P.S.'s ability and competitiveness as a sportsman. When P.G. was a research student and junior member of staff, the Botany School ran a team in the Inter-departmental Cricket League. Botany were allowed by Emmanuel College to use their very attractive sports field on the west side of Cambridge as their home ground. On joining the Botany team in a very humble capacity P.G. found that the star players were Peter Sell and Peter Barham (later Chief Technician). Both were very capable and reliable batsmen, much admired by

other members of the team, and an inspiration to them. P.S. had been a highly competitive footballer too.

P.G. spoke mostly about the three themes about which he had had innumerable discussions over the years with P.S., but particularly in the last twenty years. The first was the need to recognise on morphological grounds distinct subspecies which occur in different habitats and P.S.'s frustration that almost no ecologist specifies the subspecies on which he or she has made observations or carried out experiments. The second was P.S.'s passionate belief in evolution, the need to realise that 'species' have diverged and are still diverging to varying degrees, and the consequence that simple statements on how many species there are in a given family or part of the world are worthless. The third was his frustration that the conservation of nature, and more broadly of the countryside, had fallen into the hands of incompetent people – ignorant of taxonomy and ecology and of the traditional patterns of management. He was especially distressed by their inability to appreciate the differences between native species (or subspecies) and close relatives from abroad imported and planted under ignorant managers.

Finally P.G. recalled the difficulty of withdrawing from any of the long discussions he had with P.S. in the Herbarium, edging gradually and slowly toward the door before managing to make his escape!

Philip Oswald's tribute

I first met Peter Sell on 25 June 1953, a year after the trip to Ireland described by Donald Pigott and at the end of my second year as a Classics undergraduate at King's College – but in Snowdonia, not in Cambridge. John Raven, whom I often refer to as my official Classics supervisor and unofficial botanical mentor, had organised a botanical tour. His friend Dick Burges, a Birmingham G.P., drove him, his father, Canon Charles Raven (a former Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University and at the time President of the B.S.B.I.), and Peter, to visit sites for hawkweeds, starting in Herefordshire on 20 June and going on to the Brecon Beacons, Craig Breidden etc. Peter, aged 23, was already an expert in the genus *Hieracium*, and John, who with his father had already painted almost the entire British and Irish flora, had recently become excited by hawkweeds and so invited Peter to help find and identify them. Sometimes Charles painted the leaves and John the more exacting inflorescences, often before breakfast. Each painting passed the test if Peter could identify the species depicted.

John invited me to join the party in Snowdonia, where Charles was to be collected by one of his three daughters. Here John, like many a Victorian before him but possibly as the last botanist ever to do so, had engaged a

local guide – a quarryman called Evan Roberts, later to become the N.C.C.’s Chief Warden for Snowdonia. On 26 June we did the obvious thing and visited Cwm Idwal, where Peter made a list of the plants that we saw, including the famous Snowdon Lily, *Lloydia serotina*. Among the species names this list includes a note, “Peregrine Falcon flew over.” We should remember that Peter’s first love was birds rather than plants and be grateful that it was only because there was no suitable vacancy in the Zoology Department when he left school at 14 in 1943 that he went to work in the Herbarium instead.

Next day John set Peter and me a daunting task – to be guided by Evan across the mountains from near Llyn Ogwen by A5 to a pub at Tal-y-Bont near Dolgarrog on B5106 – while he and his father had a family gathering. My ancient O.S. inch-to-a-mile map shows that this is nine miles as the crow flies, but, going via Ysgolion Duon (Black Ladders) and Craig-y-Dulyn and with all the ups and downs, it must have been a good deal further. Anyway we duly collected nine hawkweeds on the crags, saw *Lloydia* again at closer quarters and, to John’s surprise, arrived on time at the pub at 6 p.m. to claim our well deserved reward of a pint!

From Snowdonia we went on to the Yorkshire Dales, where we enjoyed full board at the Hill Inn, by Ingleborough, for £1 per day, including a packed lunch and a whole Wensleydale cheese to help ourselves to at dinner. Here John led us to see Jacob’s-ladder, *Polemonium caeruleum*, at Grassington; only later did I realise that we had walked within a few yards of the only plant of Lady’s-slipper Orchid in Britain, which John had been allowed to paint *in situ* a year or two previously on the strict condition that he did not reveal its location to anyone.

Then it was Upper Teesdale, where Peter surprised two young ladies bathing naked below High Force and later found them, now dressed for dinner, chatting to John and Dick in the bar at the Langdon Beck Hotel. The conversation suddely dried up, to the puzzlement of the two gentlemen! Somehow I missed out on this event, which Peter used to relish recounting with his inimitable chuckles.

Over the whole trip of 16 days Peter made 173 gatherings of *Hieracium* specimens for the Cambridge Herbarium, plus a few of *Sorbus*, *Euphrasia* and *Alchemilla*. He scrupulously attributed two of the hawkweeds, from Widdybank Fell, to me. Perhaps I was there while he was at High Force!

Caroline Pannell’s tribute

Most of you probably think of Peter as a British and European botanist, but he approached tropical plants with a similar depth of understanding, even though he never travelled outside Europe to see them in their natural habitat.

Peter helped me write my first taxonomic description of the rain forest trees, *Aglaia*, using the male flowering and female flowering and fruiting specimens I had collected and field notes I had made from numbered trees in my study site in Peninsular Malaysia. Every description I have written since has been based on the comprehensive template we produced for that first species. Then, in his thorough and methodical way, he took out the Hiern collections from the Cambridge Herbarium (CGE) and the relevant volume of *The Flora of British India* and proceeded to guide me through the nomenclature for the species described there, their typification and the annotation of herbarium sheets. He also shared his understanding of birds and mammals with me, as I wrote up my findings on vertebrates feeding on the arillate seeds of these *Aglaia* trees. His depth of understanding of plants, including trees, their variation and the behaviour of their associated animals was combined with an immense generosity with his time. As a result, my D. Phil. thesis became the unshakable foundation on which all the research and publications I have produced since have been based. I suspect there are other people in this room today who are indebted to Peter in a similar way.

After this, in the 1980s, Peter made several visits to Oxford to consult the George Claridge Druce types of in the Druce Herbarium (OXF). (He made no bones about the fact that he disapproved of the Druce Junior Research Fellowship being given to me, a tropical botanist!) We would walk through fields and the ancient floodplain hay meadows along the Thames and he identified every plant to its subspecies, variety or hybrid. Sometimes there was no name for the infraspecific taxon, but he talked about what made this plant different and said that it needed a name. He pointed out the difference between the native taxa in these unimproved meadows and the introductions to grass verges and other disturbed habitats. I have referred to those lists over and over again, especially when I find myself with botanists and ecologists who are not keen to recognise the differences between infraspecific taxa and between our native plants and the alien 'look-alikes'.

Peter and Gina Murrell began field work on the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland* on 13 May 1987, with a description of *Ceratocarpus claviculata* on Dunwich Heath in Suffolk, in a snowstorm, and Peter wrote the last plant description in December 2012; thus the Flora took 25 years to write.

In 1997, on the occasion of his retirement, Peter described their search for *Limonium cantianum* at St Margaret's Bay in Kent. He said it was 'raining stair-rods' and the news on the radio told them there was a gale on the coast and over four inches of rain had fallen overnight. He remarked to Gina that most people would go back to Cambridge and forget about St Margaret's Bay. All she said was that she rather liked doing what other people would not do. His reaction to this was that, if he had ever had any doubts about asking Gina to help him write the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*, such doubts were dispelled, as doing what other people would not do was what he

had been doing all his life. And so they went to St Margaret's Bay and in torrential rain and with mountainous seas breaking on the cliffs they got their plant. It was a wonderful sight that they were glad they had not missed. In his preface to Volume 5, the first to be published, Peter added another important element in his collaboration with Gina when he wrote: 'The work of one had complemented the work of the other and we were able to criticise one another without antagonism.'

Max Walters wrote in his foreword to Volume 5: 'The authors of this impressive work have set themselves a colossal task. They have made an excellent start, and we can only wish them a successful conclusion.' Gina and Peter have been unstinting in their dedication to the completion of their Flora and it is now very close to that successful conclusion. Although it is sad that Peter did not live to see the last volumes published, he was content that he and Gina had achieved their aim of writing a comprehensive critical Flora of Great Britain and Ireland and was grateful to the group of friends who have taken on much of the responsibility for seeing the last two volumes through the press.

I had one last walk with Peter in March last year and was, as always, enthralled by his knowledge of plant variation and of introduced weeds. He walked without a stick and his mind was as sharp as ever. We listened to a robin singing in a tree on the edge of the allotments near his home in Cambridge and he recited two lines from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

A Robin Redbreast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.

That moment was typical of a friendship that spanned nearly four decades and seems to be a fitting note on which to end these few words of tribute to Peter and his extraordinary life.

Chris Preston's tribute

I've called my brief talk '**Learning taxonomy with Peter Sell**'. I know that there was far more to him than that – but I can't do justice to all his interests in a few minutes.

I first remember meeting Peter in 1975, when David Coombe encouraged me to take some difficult specimens we'd collected during an undergraduate project to him for identification. He dealt rapidly and without any trouble with all but two – a sedge in a troublesome group and a grass, *Glyceria*. The sedge was put on one side to be shown to Dick David – although in fact I never saw it again – and I was sent to Max Walters in the Botanic Garden to get the *Glyceria* identified. Having nervously negotiated my way past his secretary I found Max at work behind a large desk with neat piles of *Flora*

Europaea manuscripts. He shocked me by saying ‘It really is time that Peter got over his inferiority complex about grasses.’ I’m still surprised at the extent to which such busy figures were prepared to help ordinary undergraduates, though I now know that Peter too greatly valued the help he had been given when he joined the Botany Department from school. It’s an encouraging counter-example to the Larkin view that ‘man hands on misery to man’.

I gradually got to know the world of the Herbarium and the Botanic Garden. I remember in particular the excursion to the Norfolk coast after the final *Flora Europaea* symposium in 1977, when Peter was in his element, discussing questions of nomenclature and taxonomy on equal terms with the leading taxonomists in Europe. However, I really got to know Peter personally when he asked if he could work on plants of the naturalised ‘mesems’ which I’d started to grow at the Botanic Garden. By chance Peter had been allocated this family, Aizoaceae, for the proposed Sell/Stace/Valentine Critical Flora. We gradually came to work together on the group, as he drew up descriptions and I took them to the Lizard, Isles of Scilly and Channel Islands to check against living plants. It was this (rather than any formal tuition) which taught me how nomenclature and traditional taxonomy should be done.

Peter was insistent that the job was to be done **properly**. Plants were to be described from the living material or herbarium specimens – he was scathing when he came across botanists in the library copying descriptions out of books. Even the vegetables in the Flora were described from his friend Bill’s garden in Bassingbourn – once he had persuaded him to allow them to run to seed. It was nomenclature that was to be done from books – and it was important to consult the original descriptions. He made a special trip to Oxford to see the illustrations of the mesems coloured by Dillenius himself in 1732 in a copy of *Hortus Elthamensis* – I think Caroline helped with this – and he spent years tracking down the rare journal *Diana* in which Bechstein had described a European *Sorbus* species. All these matters were carefully thought out and for years I used the single sheet on which he had defined the various sorts of types – a far clearer exposition than was available in published form. He disapproved of those who approached nomenclature by ignoring the intentions of the original author and manipulating the materials to achieve the outcome they required; this was ‘**fiddling**’ and was bound to lead to instability in the long-run. Those who did things really badly were likely to be called ‘**bodgers**’; ‘**He’s just a bodger**’ is perhaps the rudest thing I ever heard him say about someone.

People with such strong views might easily make enemies – and had he been a more acerbic person, Peter might easily have acquired enemies all over Europe. However, he had an extraordinary ability to express his views trenchantly without giving any offence. I’m not quite sure how he managed

this, but his complete integrity was perhaps one factor, coupled with his lack of personal ambition. He was also extraordinarily generous with information, always willing to supply his unpublished results to others. He was always worried in case they messed them up, but never concerned about personal recognition. One Biological Flora author reproduced a long description of a plant that he had provided, *verbatim* without any acknowledgement, and all he said was that he thought this was a mistake as, if there was any mistake in the description, the author would be blamed for it.

Doing as much work as Peter did to such exacting standards inevitably involved long, hard, concentrated work, and he remained dedicated to his work to the end of his life, but there were frequently opportunities for more wide-ranging conversation. Often the first you would know of his presence in the Herbarium was the sound of laughter emerging from one of the bays. And I soon begin to realise that no botanical problem, however deeply engaged he was in it, could compete for his attention with the sight of a pretty woman walking by. And he remained cheerful and dedicated to his work, despite his conviction for at least the last 30 years of his life that the world was going to the dogs. I sometimes tried, just for sheer devilment, to try to convince him that things weren't that bad – that David Gower was as elegant a batsman as Frank Woolley, that we actually had more expert botanical recorders now than in the 1950s or that computers weren't all bad. I never made any headway at all, but I always got a cheery farewell as we parted.

The members of the Department of Botany in the 1960s and 1970s were a remarkable group of scholars – Professor Corner, David Coombe, Harry Godwin, John Risbeth, Max Walters, Alex Watt, Harold Whitehouse and several still living who are here today. With no formal education to match these, Peter was deservedly treated by them on equal terms. And like so many members of the Department, Peter was always ready to make time to encourage the young – something for which I will always be grateful.

Jane Bulleid's tribute

I can't remember when I first met Peter Sell (we both came from south-west Cambridgeshire but grew up in different decades): it must have been by the mid 1990s, when Cambridge University Press asked me to undertake the copy-editing of Volume 5 of the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*. This involved some visits to the Herbarium, for discussions with Peter and Gina. I'm not an academic botanist and had not visited the Herbarium before – a mysterious place where masses of knowledge was kept on sheets of paper in boxes on tall shelves, with sections under current study in piles on the

cabinets in the central aisle, people appearing and disappearing among the side bays and near-silence occasionally punctuated by bursts of laughter and giggling.

Around the same time I joined the Editorial Board of *Nature in Cambridgeshire*, which held its meetings in one of the side bays, and each year I would deliver a copy of the latest issue to Peter. He would immediately look through it with interest, providing instant comment on the contents as well as constructive feedback relating to previous issues. He contributed to several issues and was pleased to find that I took an interest in his articles on Cambridgeshire *Prunus* (in Numbers 33 and 34) – and indeed knew some of the individual plants – and, later, on introduced ‘look-alikes’ in new woods and reconstructed grasslands (in Number 48).

As far as I remember, the production of Volume 5 (‘getting the monocots out of the way’) went quite well. Over the next few years I visited the Herbarium now and then to see how he and Gina were getting on with the dicots. Index cards were being written (P.D.S.) and typed up (G.M.) for several families at the same time, the tally of *Hieracium* and *Taraxacum* species kept rising, sometimes the authors weren’t well, moves were afoot; would Volume 4 ever be completed, let alone the others? I lost touch with the project and was pleased to hear, soon after Peter’s funeral, that Volumes 1 and 2 of the Flora had just about been completed before his death and that four distinguished botanical colleagues would see them through to publication. A few months later, Philip Oswald invited me to help with proofreading Volume 2, including the *Prunus* pages!

The Flora took about 25 years to write and may take about 20 years to publish. The ‘Good ol’ Booy’ from Bassingbourn and his botanical efforts will not be forgotten any time soon!

Lynne Farrell’s tribute

I first met Peter in 1974 when I was working in the Biological Records Centre at Monks Wood as Dr Franklyn Perring’s botanical assistant. I had not been in that post very long and was getting to grips with all the records, sorting them out and writing species accounts for the first *British Red Data Book for Vascular Plants* (1977).

Peter phoned up to enquire about records for *Sorbus* and *Hieracium* in South Wales. So I located the relevant pink cards and reported back that there were quite a few sites. Apparently he was impressed by such a quick response (may be 30 seconds’ delay – would that meet today’s target time?) and asked if he could come over to extract more details. Of course he could, I replied, thinking that it would be a good opportunity to meet one of the

country's leading botanists and actually to use the pink cards for something productive.

When we were collating the data the following week, he suggested that a field visit the following year to Craig y Cilau and Craig Cerrig Gleisiad would be a good idea, to update the records and check the populations of the rarer species on these steep cliffs, and would I like to join him? You can be sure that I jumped at the chance. So we spent two weeks crawling up and down the different layers and mapping the species. I suspect that today we would have needed to complete a major risk assessment for the trip, but both of us did not mind scrambling and the weather was fine and the limestone not too slippery. Species that we recorded included the hawkweeds *Hieracium vagense*, *H. neocoracinum*, *H. cyathis* and *H. subbritanicum* and the whitebeams *Sorbus porrigentifomis*, *S. minima*, *S. leptophylla*, *S. rupicola* and *S. anglica*. Some of these may have changed their names since then and that might be due to Peter reclassifying them!

This information also proved useful more recently when Tim Rich was researching for his book, *Whitebeams, Rowans and Service Trees of Britain and Ireland* (2010), and also writing up accounts of *Hieracia* in Wales.

Peter himself always had a twinkle in his eye and a keen sense of humour. He was totally dedicated to observing and writing about the British flora. He noticed characteristics of plants that other people simply thought about and would say 'Well, that looks a bit different', and then go on to describe exactly what he had observed when in the field. He helped me with a Latin description of *Orchis militaris* for the Biological Flora (1985), for instance, describing the differences as he saw them between the two known populations in Buckinghamshire and Suffolk.

The results of Peter's meticulous work, a major collaboration with Gina Murrell, are the five volumes of the *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*. These will be a standard text for many years to come and an inspiration to those botanists 'wishing to look at plants more closely' in order to see and understand the small differences. They will help in research, fathoming out evolutionary changes and ecological aspects into the future as well as understanding past origins.