

Victor Johnstone (1944–2015)

Vic Johnstone, who died of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) on 3rd May 2015, aged 71, was a keen botanist who developed a particular interest in *Verbascum*, for which he acted as referee for the BSBI from 2001 until his death.

Vic was born to working class parents on 9th April 1944 at Writtle, Essex, and was brought up in Brentwood and East Ham, London. According to Vic, everyone in East Ham at that time worked at the docks, including his father who was in radar, and who took his young son to visit many of the ships berthed there and whose captains he knew personally. On his own admission Vic was very well educated at East Ham Grammar School, but bitterly regretted not going to University. Vic was not a botanist by profession. On leaving school at 16 he went to work for the Essex Rivers Board. He then spent nearly ten years, much of this time in the Far East, as a Senior Electronics Technician in the RAF. After that he managed several pubs and wine-bars in London, including the famous Gordon's in Villiers Street. He then turned his hand to woodwork and became a highly skilled carpenter, specialising in gothic furniture which was not always comfortable but invariably eye-catching.

During his time with the Essex Rivers Board, Vic was horrified by the quantities of industrial effluent that poured into the River Thames, then considerably more polluted than it is now. It was this early experience that gave him his loathing of anything that contributed to the destruction of the natural environment. Nothing distressed him more than to see woods and fields bulldozed to make way for roads and houses. He rescued orchids from the path of the M25 and deplored the cutting of the M3 through Twyford Down, though he maintained that the barely publicised damage to Moor Green (famous for its numerous orchid species and their hybrids) by the construction of the M27 was a far more devastating blow to Hampshire's flora.

Destruction wrought by human hand was bad enough, but the great storm of October 1987 wrecked large swathes of southern England. Vic plodded despondently along the footpaths of Surrey, Sussex and Kent, recording uprooted trees, particularly the shallow-rooted beeches of the chalk downland, to the depressing sound of chainsaws. There was, however, one bonus brought about by the 'hurricane' (more correctly an extra-tropical cyclone). The following spring there was an explosion of wild flowers not previously seen in such profusion as a result of the disturbed earth and greater light. In *BSBI News* (50: 22, 1988), Vic wrote a short note about the germination of long-buried seed after noticing *Verbascum thapsus* and *Atropa belladonna* springing up where trees had been uprooted. This gave rise to an interesting correspondence from various botanists confirming Vic's observations (*BSBI News* 51: 27–29, 1989; 52: 25–28, 1989 and 53: 24–26, 1989) and adding to the list of plants whose seed clearly remained viable despite having lain dormant for long periods, possibly even hundreds of years.

When I first met Vic over thirty years ago, he informed me that it was his intention to photograph every wild flower in Britain. Not unsurprisingly, he soon realised that he would be unable to fulfil this particular ambition. He was, however, remarkably successful in photographing most of the flora of southern England. There was not much in Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset that escaped his notice. Most of this ground was covered by day trips at the weekend using public transport from London, and later from Whitchurch, Hampshire, but there were also more extended forays into Devon, Somerset and Cornwall.

Vic loved all plants passionately, but his special interest was in wild orchids. He would return year after year to the North and South Downs, the woods of Kent, and the coast, hills and heaths of Purbeck to see and record his special favourites. Many BSBI members will

remember seeing his photographic albums which he exhibited for several years at the November Annual Exhibition Meeting when the meetings were held in London.

When the BSBI embarked upon its Scarce Plants Project in the early 1990s, Vic was approached to do a survey of two areas in Kent and Sussex to ascertain numbers of *Verbascum lychnitis*. It was in the course of his expeditions to track down this plant that he came across some *Verbascum* hybrids which had occurred naturally in the wild. This gave him the idea that if one deliberately crossed selected species, it should be possible to create some very interesting hybrids. This is what he and I proceeded to do over the next few years, after building up a collection at two different sites in Whitchurch, which included both native species and those from the Mediterranean region, as well as many horticultural cultivars. When approached, the National Council for the Conservation of Plants & Gardens (NCCPG) granted the collection national status. Vic and I maintained this collection for about a decade, until advancing years and ill health made it impossible to continue (Wilson, 2015). It was a very difficult collection to maintain as there are over 300 species, only a handful of them are British natives, and only a few are properly perennial. As *Verbascum* is notoriously promiscuous, the seed gathered and sown would invariably produce a high percentage of hybrids, and, in some cases the original species was lost.

For several years Vic was BSBI referee for *Verbascum*. Soggy packages of plants would

arrive, sometimes in an advanced state of decay or missing some vital part such as the basal leaves and frequently accompanied by an inadequate photograph. It is to his credit that he was remarkably successful in identifying whatever species or hybrid had been sent. Maintaining the National Collection and breeding new cultivars inevitably resulted in less time and energy for expeditions in the field, but Vic maintained his love of wild flowers, which he secretly preferred to anything produced by horticulture. He introduced a wide range of wild flowers (which he grew from seed) into the local Whitchurch Millennium Green Meadow, and was sowing seeds until a few weeks before his death.

Sadly Vic died a few weeks before the launch at the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show of *Verbascum* 'Firedance', the first truly red *Verbascum* ever to have been bred. It is hoped that Vic's botanical photographs can be incorporated into a suitable collection and entered into a database. These data should provide a valuable resource for future generations and this is a legacy about which Vic would have been truly delighted.

Reference:

WILSON, C. (2015). 'Vic Johnstone (1944-2015) and the National Plant Collection of *Verbascum*'. *Plant Heritage Hampshire and Isle of Wight Group Newsletter Autumn 2015*: 13–14.

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