
ALAN GEORGE KNAPP (1947–2010)

On the website of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society there is a page bearing a map of Sussex with a grid of tetrads superimposed, each tetrad tagged with a coloured symbol corresponding to the number of vascular plant species recorded in it since 2000. By clicking on any of these 1000 or so tetrads, a window is opened containing: the date of the last visit; the months in which visits have been made, with an idea of the proportion of records from each month; the precise total of records; the names of the species recorded; the names of those species recorded in the *Sussex Plant Atlas* (1980) which have yet to be re-found; the details, with grid references, of any records of rare or scarce species so far not rediscovered; and any species regarded as common in v.c.13 and or v.c.14 which is apparently absent. Given that the map has been constantly updated with incoming data, it will be readily appreciated what an extremely valuable resource this has proved in the field work leading to a new Sussex Flora, which is scheduled to appear in the next two or three years. This web-page map was created by Alan Knapp, one of the prime-movers of the Flora project, who has, alas, not lived to see his work come to fruition.

Born on the 25th February 1947, Alan George Knapp grew up in South London and, as a child, was encouraged to take an interest in both the natural world and the practical things in life. At Colfe's School his burgeoning passion for all things scientific and technical was given focus by an inspirational chemistry teacher. In the 1950s and 1960s the availability over the high street counter of certain chemicals prohibited today enabled youthful scientists to conduct all manner of potentially hazardous tests: Alan took a particular delight in the explosions resulting from the application of water to small pieces of sodium buried in his parents' garden.

All such home experiments having been survived, Alan moved on to University College, London, where there was available a more controlled environment in which to study Chemistry. Here he excelled, winning the Faculty of Science Medal, awarded for distinction in the final examination. Study for a doctorate was the next step and the next prize the Ramsay Memorial Medal, for distinguished work carried out in the Department of Chemistry at UCL. The Chemistry Department also furnished Alan with a bride, for Kathryn Sarginson from Leigh in Lancashire was impressed by him on their very first day at university: they eventually married while they were both pursuing postgraduate research, setting up home in a rented flat in Golders Green and later moving to Romford in Essex.

Alan proceeded to postdoctoral research at Queen Mary College, London, and it was during this period that he became interested in electronics. On the domestic front this bore fruit in the form of an enormous television, which doubled as either a seat or a table. Beyond the home, the combination of chemical and electronic expertise made Alan highly employable. Philips was the company which was to benefit from his talents from 1973 until his retirement, some 30 years later.

Employment prompted a move to Crawley, and in these settled conditions it was not long before the arrival of a son, Ian, and a daughter, Suzanne. At about this time Alan developed what was to become a deep interest in botany. Colleagues were birders but Alan preferred objects of study which were not so fast moving and somehow plants appealed to his scientific mind. At the Horsham Natural History Society Alan came to know Arthur Hoare, a member of both the BSBI and the WFS who happily lived nearby. Arthur furthered Alan's early ventures into botany and introduced him to the Sussex Botanical Recording Society (SBRS) where his enthusiasm and expertise grew exponentially. Alan came to lament the fact that business trips for Philips rarely took him to botanically interesting surroundings – in the Far East there was only time to notice cosmopolitan pavement weeds, and the environs of Eindhoven he reported to be somewhat less than exotic. Exploration beyond Sussex was thus

reserved for family holidays, with Teesdale and Cyprus both particularly happy hunting-grounds.

His innate intellectual curiosity, and his careful and rigorous approach equipped him admirably for the discipline, and it was in Alan's nature to pass on the knowledge gained to others. His scientific background prompted him to challenge everything: any little vagueness about the identification of a plant or its precise site would be questioned and the reporter would be required to think more carefully. Kathryn was amused to note how one of the members of the SBRS was kind enough to describe the interrogation technique as 'gentle probing comments'! Alan's precision was also evident in his photography: at every indoor meeting of the SBRS there would be slides of superb quality to illustrate new finds and key plant details, and it was natural that a large number of his photographs should be selected to illustrate Mary Briggs' guide for the non-expert, *Sussex wild flowers* (2004).

In the SBRS Alan became a popular field meetings leader, celebrated for well-planned and instructive outings that were conducted in a spirit that was congenial as well as scientific. From 1997 he assisted Mary Briggs, the BSBI Recorder for v.c.13, taking over the lead role in 2008 when failing eyesight made it difficult for her to deal with correspondence. With highly developed IT skills of his own and generous help from the late Pete Selby among others, Alan soon tamed such beasts as MapMate, and he was able to write his own software to facilitate the handling of records for a number of different purposes, chiefly for use in the projected new Flora of Sussex.

The idea of producing a new Sussex Flora was hatched between Alan and Paul Harmes at around the Millennium and led to the formation of a six-strong working group. Even before retirement, field work had consumed a large amount of time, but now Alan and Kathryn enjoyed a busy schedule of visiting all parts of Sussex recording for the Flora. In addition to the gathering of records, Alan set about writing the draft species accounts for the new Flora, sharing the task with Frances Abraham.

Although Alan contributed notes on a wide variety of botanical topics to the SBRS bi-annual newsletter, beyond this he wrote comparatively little. A useful article on species of *Potamogeton* appeared in *Sussex Botany* Issue 1 (2004) and most recently there has been the important note on *Ranunculus ×hiltonii*, published posthumously in *BSBI News* (September 2010, No. 114). He was, however, a co-author of the *Flora of Ashdown Forest* (1996) under the leadership of Tim Rich; and he played a major part in the production of the *Sussex rare plant register* (2001). This experience will have been of great value when it came to planning the new Flora. It is a matter for considerable regret that the proposed analysis of the changes in the county flora since the *Sussex plant atlas*, to which he had been giving much thought, was never written for the new work.

Thus Alan did not live long enough to see the new Sussex Flora through to publication, succumbing to cancer on 29 August 2010. The Flora will, nevertheless, be very much his crowning achievement, for it is his vision that has shaped it and all those who are working towards the goal have been inspired by him. At the SBRS indoor meeting in November 2010 Alan was remembered through photographs of past field meetings. He had a penchant for aquatics in general and *Potamogeton* in particular, and thus there were several pictures of him fishing with his trusty grapnel and extricating the strands of the catch. But most images were of him at the centre of a throng of earnest members presenting scraps of vegetation for his consideration and verbal reports of species urgently to be crossed off the card. Alan fielded all this with courtesy, good humour and frightful puns. Field meetings in v.cc.13 and 14 will never be quite the same again.

I am indebted to Kathryn Knapp for the earlier biographical details in this note, which is an adaptation of the obituary published in the *SBRS Newsletter* of January 2011. The Society as a whole is extremely grateful to Ian Knapp for his overhaul of its website and his generous help

and advice, which will ensure that his father's tetrad map continues to monitor and steer recording for the new Sussex Flora as it enters its final stages.

NICK STURT



Alan Knapp on the Sussex coast.

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