



Esmé Kirby – Guardian of Snowdonia

I first met her during the spring of 1997. She spoke passionately of her wish to reverse the decline of red squirrel populations in Wales, and persuaded me to take up the cause. Of course I knew very little about her then, other than that she appeared determined for work to start immediately.

It was only much later that I learned of her remarkable story and her life long commitment to Snowdonia.

Esmé Cummins was born August 31st 1910 in Croydon, South London. During the Great War her family came to live at Llandudno where her father built and ran the North Wales Golf Club. It was one of the first private clubs in Wales and Esmé excelled as a player. Eventually she set out upon an acting career, and by chance was chosen for training by Sir Frank Benson, the famous Shakespearean actor. Esmé spent considerable time upon the stage, but her love of horse riding was to lead her back to Snowdonia.

In 1935, she was running riding stables when she met, and soon afterwards married, her first husband Thomas Firbank. He had just purchased the 2500-acre mountain farm of Dyffryn Mymbyr on the southern slope of the Glyders between Capel Curig and Pen-y-Gwyrdd. Esmé instantly threw herself into the role of farmer's wife, and shared her husband's passion for the dramatic wilds of Snowdonia. Those early years at Dyffryn were later immortalised by Thomas in his best-selling book 'I Bought a Mountain'. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Thomas, like so many young men, went to fight the forces of fascism. Thomas never returned to the farm and the couple were later divorced. Life then was desperately hard for Esmé, but soon after the war she met and married her second husband Major Peter Kirby.

The concept of conservation was of course still in its infancy in those days. Nevertheless, Esmé recognised that the wild beauty of Snowdonia should be managed carefully if its character were to remain for future generations to enjoy. Subsequently, in the 1960s, she founded the Snowdonia National Park Society (now re-christened 'The Snowdonia Society') and with Peter, restored the near to ruin Ty Hyll, the Ugly House, which she had bought as a headquarters for her growing Society. Developers within the National Park were always to be scrutinised and despoilers fiercely opposed. Esmé was also equally ready, where necessary, to chastise conservation bodies, particularly for 'bureaucratic obstacles' or 'airy-fairy ideas'.

Characteristically outspoken, her dogged persistence and forthright manner may not have received universal approval, but at the very least, it would earn her a grudging respect. However, to many, including myself, she was seen as an honest and enthusiastic standard bearer, and someone who you knew would always truthfully speak her mind. With growing differences developing between her and other members of the Snowdonia National Park Society, she eventually stood down as chair. As the Society sought a new and independent direction, it celebrated its twenty-first anniversary. At a dinner to mark the occasion, the members presented Esmé with a gift of £3,500. She promptly used the money to establish the Esmé Kirby Snowdonia Trust! This, she stated, would seek to *complement* the work of the Society. Work

began immediately with efforts to maintain and establish footpaths in the Capel Curig area. In all this work she was supported by Peter, who made all the foot-bridges on the Glyder Fach mountain path.

As a conservationist Esmé was in her element when offering to do something that many regarded as almost impossible. Her conservation victories were impressive; the preservation of the famous Cromlech Boulders within the Llanberis Pass, the restoration of the milestones on the Welsh section of Thomas Telford's historic coach route from Chirk to Holyhead and preventing development adjacent to the famous Pen-y-Gwyrdd climbers hotel. In her later years, and with untiring enthusiasm, Esmé passionately advocated the control of grey squirrels in order to save the few red squirrels remaining on Anglesey.

The grey squirrel invaded and colonised Anglesey during the late 1960s. And like so many areas across Britain, this destructive forest pest has progressively replaced the smaller and native red squirrel. By 1998, less than forty adult red squirrels remained on the island. Under Esmé's guidance, the systematic control of grey squirrels began early that year. The red squirrel population responded positively, and rapidly increased in size to reach one hundred by the spring of 2002. Animals can now be found throughout the conifer plantation of Mynydd Llwydiarth whilst the species has also re-colonised several broadleaved woodlands including Wern-Y-Wylan, Cors Eddreiniog and woodland within the Plas Gwyn estate. Anglesey now contains the second largest red squirrel population in Wales. The success of the conservation project has also attracted significant European funds.

In 2002, the project entered a new and exciting phase; the reintroduction of red squirrels into the 750-hectare Newborough pine plantation. Native red squirrels had persisted within this woodland until grey squirrels completely replaced them in the mid 1990s. The project to reinstate reds is ambitious, but already grey squirrels have been eradicated from the forest and several large release enclosures built. These contain red squirrels that will eventually be allowed out to explore the surrounding woodland. It is hoped that they will establish home ranges with these pine stands and that they will eventually breed, so gradually re-colonising Newborough forest. If successful, it will be one step closer to Esmé's vision 'To make Anglesey, once again, red squirrel country'.

On the 18th October 1999, Esmé passed away within the walls of her beloved farmhouse, Dyffryn Mymbyr. And it is fitting that her mortal remains were buried on the mountain to which she had devoted her life. Her work was summed up on the front page of the Daily Post Newspaper with an epitaph appropriately entitled 'Farewell Snowdonia's Friend'.

Esmé may have passed on, but through the continued work of her small charitable trust, her memory remains alive in Snowdonia.

Craig Shuttleworth is a conservationist and active supporter of the Esmé Kirby Snowdonia Trust.

Details of the work of the trust can be obtained from:

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