

Obituaries

VERA GORDON
1918–2006

With the death of Vera Gordon on 14 September 2006 the Liverpool botanical community and the North West of England more widely have lost someone who for very many years has been a pivotal figure, just as the B.S.B.I. too has lost one of its longest-serving vice-county Recorders as well as one of its newest Honorary Members.

Born on 25 May 1918, Vera was brought up in Liverpool's northern suburbs, first in Bootle and later in Waterloo, and continued to live at the same address in the second of those for almost her entire adult life. To the warmth, helpfulness and lively humour for which that city is renowned she added the specially personal qualities of immense physical energy and a tirelessly enquiring mind. Both her parents and her only brother were keen ramblers and through that she was introduced to the countryside at an early age, acquiring an interest in wild flowers during family holidays in the Lake District and North Wales. The South Lancashire sand dunes, with their magnificently rich flora, also lay within easy walking distance of the family home.

From primary school in Bootle she won a scholarship to the grammar school there, and she would surely have gone on to university had she been born half a century later. As it was, her formal education ended at sixteen and she went to work in the accounts department of a local firm of dry-cleaners. When the Second World War broke out she fondly eyed the Women's Land Army as her way of contributing to the war effort but she was deeply disappointed that her accounting experience proved to have earmarked her inescapably for similar office work in the Royal Ordnance Department. The obverse of that coin, however, was that she acquired the security of the Civil Service thereby, which subsequently enabled her to transfer to a career more to her liking as administrative officer in the local magistrates court, where she remained till her retirement.

Meanwhile, her father's membership of a photographic society had brought him the acquaintance of Dr C. Theodore Green, the author in 1933 of a second edition of the *Flora of the Liverpool District*, and at the latter's instance Vera was encouraged to join the city's long-standing Botanical Society. Barely eighteen then, she must have found that body

initially rather awesome, with its goodly sprinkling of Edwardian veterans who had built up over the years a breadth of expertise quite normal in their day, but by then becoming all too rare. The doyen, W. G. Travis, a collaborator in his youth of the by that time legendary J. A. Wheldon, was typical in being as well-versed in bryophytes, lichens and microfungi as he was in flowering plants and ferns; for thirty years he had been compiling on the Society's collective behalf a much-needed flora of South Lancashire, the densely-populated (and long well-botanised) vice-county 59. A young enthusiast with energy to spare was nevertheless more than welcome, and the very next year she found herself elected to the Society's Council and the year after that one of two Honorary Secretaries. Sixty-two years later she was still serving in that second capacity, a record of continuity interrupted only by an eventual term as President in 1952–1953 followed by three years as Vice-President. Throughout that exceptionally long period she played the principal part in holding that small society together, for without her efficiency and friendly informality it might well have petered out.

In 1950, on the top of a swaying double-decker bus bound for the advertised venue of one of the Society's field meetings, for which we were the only two to have braved the heavy rain, Vera learned of the recrudescence that the Botanical Exchange Club had recently undergone in its new guise as the BSB.I. In common with many field botanists in the North, the Liverpool ones had long held aloof from the BEC on account of its lingering identification in their eyes with the 19th century tradition of reckless collecting; once Vera joined the B.S.B.I. however, and began passing around her copies of the new BSBI publications, all the other leading members speedily followed her example.

Thereafter Vera was a frequent attendee, and always active participant, at BSBI field meetings, enlivening them with her infectious laughter and exemplary persistence in recording however atrocious the weather. One that proved particularly memorable for her was that in West Cork in 1964. To get there, she had to make a lengthy journey by bus on which to her delight she found herself engulfed in inimitable Irish rustic chatter; then, once the meeting was under

way, her sharp eyes spotted an unfamiliar plant with small white flowers which was to turn out to be another native Sandwort, *Minuartia recurva*, new to the British Isles list.

By then her BSBI involvement had been substantially extended by her appointment as Recorder for South Lancashire, in which increasingly onerous capacity – coinciding as it did with the 1950s Distribution Maps Scheme – she was to serve for thirty-six years. Additionally, when a short-lived tier of ‘District Secretaries’ was introduced in 1960 to deal with the growing flood of enquiries of a less strictly scientific nature, she willingly shouldered responsibility for that secondary task in the group of vice-counties that made up the ‘Mersey’ Province.

Around the same time the teaching of plant taxonomy at Liverpool University experienced a marked revival, consequent upon the appointment to the staff of Dr Vernon Heywood and his very active involvement in the massive *Flora Europaea* project. This intensified the need for a guide to the local flora for placing in the hands of students, and as a result the long-accumulating Flora of South Lancashire, which had been languishing because of the latterly frail health and then decease of Travis, had new life vigorously breathed into it. Vera was the natural choice as secretary of a new committee charged with the daunting task of using the manuscript left by Travis as the basis for a volume of a more modern character that was more realistically publishable. To her also fell much of the time-consuming checking of the many post-1939 records and the rounding-up of additional ones that were found to be needed, though that formed only one ingredient in the eventually seven years of combined effort out of which the much-modified Flora at last emerged into print, in 1963, with Vera’s name justly featuring alongside those of Heywood and Dr J. P. Savidge as joint editors.

Such was the ability and care Vera had displayed in that prolonged undertaking that the University saw her as the obvious person to revitalise and curate its herbarium; but on being sounded out she reluctantly concluded that, with a non-transferable Civil Service pension in prospect, such a move involved too great a sacrifice financially. The University was not to forget her, however, for two decades later, in 1987, it conferred on her an honorary M.Sc. Legend has it that the University’s imposing Daimler sent to her home to convey

her to the degree ceremony created almost more of a sensation locally that the honour itself.

Further recognition followed, In 2001 Vera finally allowed the Liverpool Botanical Society to elect her to honorary membership, and four years after that the BSBI honoured her similarly – appropriately at an A.G.M. held in Wales, over the north of which she had spent a great part of her life enquiringly striding.

It was as a great walker, indeed, that Vera will probably be remembered by the greatest number of people above anything else. As the years went by, Britain proved too confining for her energies and many parts of the world, as distant as Australia and as remote as the Caucasus, attracted her as well. Often that was with a botanical group, in which her untiring assistance and increasingly very wide knowledge was ever at her companions’ disposal; but botanizing, with its unavoidably slow pace, was not enough to absorb her seemingly inexhaustible energeticness and she varied those occasions with more arduous challenges such as the famously testing Appalachian Trail. Other favourite outlets were Scottish dancing (at which she was accomplished enough to become a teacher of it at evening classes), gardening (alpinists were a speciality) and photography, this last an enthusiasm passed on to her by her father and at which, like him, she came to excel.

Alert and reasonably active almost to the end, Vera was able to attend an indoor meeting of her beloved ‘L.B.S.’ as late as six months before her death. Four further months were then spared her before finally having to exchange her house for a nursing home near Ormskirk, where, not long afterwards, her death took place. Her extensive herbarium of British plants, together with numerous specimens collected from around the world, had been donated by her to Liverpool Museum (now World Museum Liverpool) (LIV) some years before. Her large collection of 35 mm slides has joined those, at the wish of her executors, who have also presented to the library of the Liverpool Botanical Society most of her botanical books.

For many of the details in this account I am indebted to Vera’s brother, Ron Gordon, and LBS members, in particular Susan Taylor, Joan Vincent and Eric Greenwood.

DAVID ALLEN

ROBERT ALAN FINCH
1939–2006

Dr Bob Finch, who died of cancer on 18 December 2006, was by profession a plant cytologist and by inclination a botanist whose wide-ranging interests included fungi, lichens and bryophytes as well as vascular plants. His particular speciality was in the genus *Leontodon*, of which he contributed accounts to the standard reference works.

Born on 20 April 1939, Bob showed an interest in natural history from a very early age. This interest was encouraged by one of the masters at Hastings Grammar School, Dougie Brightmore, a keen botanist. Bob's records of flowering plants appeared annually in the records section of the *Hastings and East Sussex Naturalist* from 1957 until 1975 (excepting only 1972–1973). It was in this journal that he published his first paper at the age of only 19, a survey of the vascular plants and bryophytes of six roadside clinker heaps, undertaken in 1956–1957 (Finch 1958). Clinker was used in those days for gritting roads in winter. Bob went on to Pembroke College, Oxford, where E. F. Warburg, then Britain's leading bryologist as well as a one of the authors of 'CTW', was another major influence. In 1963, soon after completing his degree, Bob published a detailed paper on the bryophytes of the Hastings area (Finch 1963).

Bob had arranged to follow his degree with a research studentship under Warburg's supervision, but the head of department, C. D. Darlington, insisted that Bob should be his student, threatening to make departmental life unpleasant for both him and Warburg unless he did so. Bob felt that he had to comply with Darlington's wishes, although it would be difficult to imagine a less congenial supervisor for the mild-mannered and unassuming Bob. Indeed Darlington told Bob outright that he was stupid – it was only when he read a biography of Darlington 40 years later that Bob discovered, to his great relief, that Darlington had written in his diary that "At the age of 18 most of the world seemed stupid and annoyed me; at 24 I know it is stupid and it ceases to worry me" (Harman 2004).

Despite the temperamental gulf between them, Bob completed a successful D.Phil. thesis at Oxford on the cytology of the genus *Leontodon* (Finch 1966). He later wrote it up as a paper during a year's temporary lectureship at

Newcastle (Finch 1967). During the fieldwork for his thesis he rediscovered the hybrid between *L. hispidus* and *L. saxatilis*, a plant hitherto reported in Britain only by another cytologist, K. B. Blackburn. Bob left Newcastle for a job as a plant cytogeneticist at the Plant Breeding Institute, Trumpington, near Cambridge, in 1967. He was recruited as a member of a new team set up to study barley, and during the course of his career he was co-author of over 30 papers on the cytology and genetics of barley. He continued to work in the Cytogenetics Department until he was made redundant in 1985, one of 42 departures in a year in which the PBI was being prepared for privatisation.

At Cambridge, Bob was able to pursue his interest in *Leontodon* with Peter Sell. Together, they undertook the difficult job of preparing an account for *Flora Europaea*, producing a radical revision in which many existing species were reduced to subspecies (Finch & Sell 1976a, 1976b). Bob had contributed the account of *Leontodon* to Stace's *Hybridization and the Flora of the British Isles* (Finch 1975) and later he and Peter Sell described *L. hispidus* × *saxatilis* as *L. × vegetus* in Sell & Murrell's (2006) *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland*. Bob also made use of the large living collection of *Hieracium* which had been built up by Peter Sell and Cyril West in the Cambridge Botanic Garden to investigate the cytology of apomixis in the genus. His observations are summarised in Sell & Murrell's account of *Hieracium*.

Bob was a very keen bryologist who collected two species new to Britain, *Tortula freibergii* in the Hastings area and *Bryum valparaisense* on St Agnes, Isles of Scilly (Preston 2007). Bob and his wife Jessica usually took their annual holiday on St Agnes, where he also rediscovered the lichen *Pseudocyphellaria aurata* at a time when it was feared extinct in Britain. He and Jessica shared other interests, including wildlife sound-recording and the poetry of the Northamptonshire poet John Clare.

Bob was an old-fashioned figure, quite out of sympathy with the prevailing attitudes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He was modest and unassuming, incapable of pushing himself forward. At bryological meetings he was prepared when necessary to

devote all his time to beginners, helping them with a cogent exposition of the characters of the mosses they encountered. He would, however, never venture an opinion without outlining the reasons why he considered that he was really unqualified to express a view. Nevertheless, he could not conceal his wide-ranging botanical knowledge and a shrewd scientific intelligence. He was very much the absent-minded academic. The methodical, meticulous and cautious approach to scientific problems which served him well as a botanist was also applied to the lesser problems of everyday life. There can be few who, like Bob, feel the need to draw a sketch map of the position of his car in the carpark before entering a motorway service station. (He was, rather surprisingly until one remembered his

perfectionism, a committed member of the Institute of Advanced Motorists.) Thus, everyday tasks tended to be time-consuming and he was not always the most punctual of men. These foibles greatly endeared him to the friends who met him regularly on the field meetings of the British Bryological Society's Cambridgeshire and Norfolk & Suffolk groups, and provided the basis of many stories. Had his talents been combined with a more driven personality he would surely have achieved even more than he did, but it was clear from the large attendance at his funeral that it was just this character which had endeared him to his friends, and he introduced many younger people to the natural world he loved. I have never met anyone quite like Bob; he was a unique character and is already greatly missed.

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C. D. PRESTON

FRANCIS ROSE

1921–2006

Francis Rose died on 15 July 2006, aged 84. He was unquestionably one of the finest field botanists of his generation and his knowledge of the flora of western Europe had few rivals.

Francis was born in south London in 1921 and he frequently told how his interest in botany was first awakened by a naturalist grandfather who took him for country walks at the early age of six. He claimed to possess a photo of himself, aged eight, collecting plants in the Alkham Valley in Kent, clutching a specimen of what was apparently *Mentha rotundifolia*. Although there was no biology taught at his Roman Catholic school Saint Francis Xavier College, he went up to London University to read Botany in 1938, first at the Chelsea Polytechnic and then Queen Mary College, from where he graduated in 1941. In 1947, after wartime work testing explosives at Woolwich Arsenal and a stint of teaching Engineering Science at Gravesend Technical School he arrived at Sir John Cass College as lecturer in botany. Two years later he moved to Bedford College, where he stayed for the next fifteen years.

Here he developed his early research interest in the ecology of lowland bogs and fens; he was awarded his PhD in 1953 for his thesis on *Researches on the Floral Ecology of British Lowland Bogs and Heaths* (Rose 1953). At this time he and his wife, Pauline Wendy, whom he had married in 1943, were living at East Malling, from where he explored the Kent and Sussex countryside, frequently in the company of the late E. C. (Ted) Wallace and R. A. (Ron) Boniface. He had already embarked upon a project to produce a new flora of the county, as none had appeared since the publication of Hanbury & Marshall's *Flora of Kent* in 1899 (Rose 1949, 1955). His publication of the Biological Flora of *Orchis purpurea*, in which he noted morphological differences between populations on either side of the Stour valley, had been an early contribution to the Kentish Flora (Rose 1948). An account of the remnant fens around Sandwich followed in 1950 (Rose 1950) and at the same time he had embarked upon a three part bryophyte Flora of the county, which he completed in 1951 (Rose 1949, 1950, 1951).

Francis maintained a continuing interest in mire ecology and was particularly fascinated by the East Anglian spring fens with their high number of what he regarded as late-glacial relic

bryophyte species. With the assistance of his research student, David Bellamy, he carried out comprehensive surveys of Redgrave and Lopham Fens, which paved the way for their declaration as National Nature Reserves (Bellamy and Rose 1961).

During this period he was closely involved with the emerging importance of the Field Study Council field centres. He co-directed, with Francis Butler, the University of London's Certificate of Proficiency in Field Biology and had particularly close relations with Juniper Hall and Flatford Mill Field Centres.

Orchids remained a particular interest. His very first paper described a new British species of *Epipactis*, *E. vectensis*, later submerged within *E. phyllanthes* (Brooke & Rose 1940), and he formally described the northern form of the Fragrant Orchid as a separate subspecies, *Gymnadenia conopsea* ssp. *borealis* (Rose 1991).

In 1964 Francis moved to King's College London as senior lecturer in Biogeography. He was appointed University Reader in 1975, a post that he occupied until his retirement in 1981. His botanical interests were essentially those of plant geography and phytosociology. He would not have claimed to be a classical taxonomist nor was he an experimental ecologist. He was fascinated with the interpretation and meanings of distribution patterns and this was combined with a formidable competence as a field botanist and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the west European flora.

Many would argue that his most influential contribution to British botany is *The Wild Flower Key*, first published in 1981 and continuously in print for over twenty-five years until the 2nd edition appeared shortly before his death, revised and updated by Clare O'Reilly. Easily the most popular and successful of plant field guides, it broke new ground with the incorporation of vegetative keys arranged by habitat. The success of these was yet further evidence of his extraordinary familiarity with the plants in the field. This was followed in 1989 by what had originally been intended as a companion volume, *Colour Identification Guide to the Grasses, Sedges, Rushes and Ferns of the British Isles and north-western Europe*. It was unfortunate that the relatively expensive, large format, hard-back edition put it beyond the reach of many students, as it, too, is still the best colour guide to these groups,

including as it does Claire Dalby's technically brilliant plates of the non-*Carex* Cyperaceae. Francis also became involved with that iconic series, the Observer's Books, revising *British ferns* (1965), *British grasses, sedges and rushes* (1965), *British wild flowers* (1978) and, with Kenneth Alvin, *Lichens* (1977).

It was natural that he would be drawn into the interest in disjunct distributions that had been stimulated by the B.S.B.I.'s 5th. conference report, particularly in relation to south-east England (Rose 1957). He developed the idea that distribution patterns were often explicable in the context of post-glacial history. Certain areas of the chalk had higher concentrations of local species than others and he noted that these were often in the vicinity of what could have acted as 'refugia' habitats, habitats that would have remained open during the Atlantic forest maximum. Similarly, the well-known concentration of oceanic species in the wooded ravines of the Central Weald, such as *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense* and *Dryopteris aemula*, were relics of the Atlantic period, surviving in a cool damp microclimate similar to that of the western seaboard.

He explored all the known outcrops of the Wealden sand rocks, refinding most of the bryophyte species recorded by W. E. Nicholson at the beginning of the last century and discovering new colonies of *Hymenophyllum*. He also demonstrated the widespread occurrence of *Dryopteris aemula* in these deep ravines, a plant that Wolley-Dod described as rare (Rose 1952; Pentecost and Rose 1985; Richardson, Rose & Rich 1985; Rose 1997).

Francis was also intrigued by the odd disjunct distributions shown by some species of the chalk of northern France and that of Britain that were absent from the North and South Downs but reappeared again north of the London Basin. His comparisons of the flora of S. E. England and northern France appeared in a number of papers in the *Bulletin de la Société de Botanique du Nord de la France* during the 1960's with his friend Prof. Jean-Marie Géhu. With Géhu's encouragement he also was intrepid enough to produce a paper on the identification of north-west European *Salicornia!* (Rose 1989)

Francis moved to Liss in the early 1960s, which was a convenient distance from the new field station at Rogate that King's College had recently opened. It was also from about the mid-1960s that his increasing interest in lichens developed, encouraged by the late T. D. V. (Dougal) Swinscow and Peter James. This

coincided with a further involvement in the use of plants as bio-indicators of past and present environmental conditions. With David Hawksworth, he was one of the first to demonstrate the value of lichens growing on tree trunks as sensitive indicators of specific levels of atmospheric sulphur pollution. (Rose & Hawksworth 1970; Hawksworth, Rose & Coppins 1973; Hawksworth and Rose 1976).

He also showed that forest lichens were not only sensitive to air quality. Certain species were only to be found in ancient undisturbed woodlands and this enabled him to construct a series of 'indices of ecological continuity', a technique that he later extended to higher plants. This work had important consequences for our interpretation of the nature of what Oliver Rackham has termed the 'wildwood', the presumed pre-agricultural forest cover of Britain. The richest sites were those with ancient trees set amid pasture grassland, such as old deer parks and parts of the New Forest, rather than continuous closed woodland. In this he anticipated by more than twenty-five years the recent theories of Franz Vera on the role of large herbivores.

His higher plant lists of ancient woodland indicator species are now widely adopted in woodland conservation assessment. Originally produced as a series of regional lists for use in lowland England, each list consisting of a hundred species, they inevitably prompted a debate on the objectivity of such indices as well as less successful attempts to produce similar indices for other habitats, such as old grassland (Hornby & Rose 1987; Rose 1999).

The move to Hampshire meant that the New Forest, as well as West Sussex were now much more accessible. There is no question that the New Forest held a special place in Francis' affections. He regarded it as the finest remaining example of lowland deciduous forest in western Europe. He was a strong supporter of the moves to establish the National Park and was hugely influential behind the scenes in helping to ensure sensitive management of the woodlands. Francis was the leading authority in western Europe on the lichen epiphytes of old forest and his 1974 paper, with Peter James, on the corticolous and lignicolous species of the New Forest was a major contribution.

The move to Hampshire also resulted in the plans to produce a Flora of Kent moving down the priority list and in the event it was never written, although he retained strong links with



Francis Rose photographing Military Orchid in the Chilterns in June 2004 (Photo: D. Streeter).

the county. However, work in Hampshire resulted in *The Flora of Hampshire*, with Lady Anne Brewis and Peter Bowman, published by Harley Books in 1996. Five introductory chapters contain a masterly account of the vegetational history and ecology of the county, in the same way that his account of the ecology of Sussex in his *Atlas of Sussex mosses, liverworts and lichens* with Rod Stern, Howard Matcham and Brian Coppins (1991) is by far the best that there is. The latter was published as a separate by the Booth Museum in 1996.

In all, Francis published over 140 books and papers, but arguably his most influential contribution lies in the countless unpublished reports for the Nature Conservancy and its successors, for local authorities and the Wildlife Trusts. The files of the old English Nature contain dozens of his reports that resulted in the original notification of a substantial proportion of all the Sites of Special Scientific Interest in southern England.

The raw material for all of this output resides in the evidence of the prodigious amount of time that he spent in the field and recorded in his field notebooks and record cards. The 200 or so notebooks, commencing in 1944 and containing about 250,000 individual records,

are held by the National Museum of Wales, together with the bulk of his herbarium, totalling over 18,000 specimens, and photographic slide collection. The note-books have been transcribed by Judith Church and computerised by the Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre. The rest of his archive (mostly lichens) is held by the Natural History Museum, and that relating to Kent by the Maidstone Museum.

In 1955 Francis was closely involved in the establishment of the Kent Field Club. For a number of years he had been botanical secretary of the South-Eastern Union of Scientific Societies, an archaic survivor of the heyday of Victorian natural history. As Director of Field Studies of the KFC, he established a number of long-term surveys, notably into the population dynamics of the Lady Orchid, *Orchis purpurea*, on the North Downs above Maidstone. He remained a staunch supporter of local natural history and was President of the Somerset Natural History and Archaeological Society in 1987.

Francis was deeply committed to the cause of conservation. He was a keynote speaker at the seminal conference held at the London Zoo in 1958 which established the County

Naturalists' Trusts in south-east England. He was the first Honorary Secretary of the Kent Trust and its Chairman from 1959–1965. He was an honorary member of both the Sussex and the Kent Trusts and a council member of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Trust. He was a founder member of Plant Life and served on its Council. He campaigned vigorously for the proposed South Downs National Park until shortly before his death.

Francis joined the B.S.B.I. in 1944 and served on both the Council and the Conservation Committee. He also served on the Council of both the British Bryological Society and the British Lichen Society, being elected President of the latter for 1980–1982. He was elected an honorary member of all three societies, the only British botanist ever to be so honoured. He was appointed M.B.E. in 2000 and received the Wildlife Trust's Christopher Cadbury medal in the following year. In 2003 the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew established the Francis Rose Reserve at Wakehurst Place, the first nature reserve in Europe to be dedicated to bryophytes, ferns and lichens. His name is celebrated in two species of lichens; *Phyllopsora rosei* and *Porina rosei*.

It is perhaps easy to forget that for the whole of his professional life, Francis was first and foremost a university academic. But his students won't forget, as a letter in the current edition of

Plantlife testifies (Spring 2007). He was an inspirational teacher and had an extraordinary gift of making even the common-place exciting and every fresh encounter with a familiar plant seem like a first meeting. His knowledge was encyclopaedic, not only about the plants themselves but about all that bore on their existence; art, history, culture, folklore. And he loved talking about them as anyone familiar with his telephone conversations will recall!

He was a larger than life character, great company with a sometimes wicked sense of humour as the story of the famous telegram sent to the late J. E. Lousley by Francis and Richard Fitter on their discovery in 1956 on the discovery of his secret Chilterns site of the Military Orchid, *Orchis militaris*, bears witness. Although, unless prompted, lunchtime might well be overlooked, opening time rarely was!

Throughout his life he enjoyed the support of his wife, Pauline Wendy. In his message to his 80th birthday conference at Cardiff he wrote that, 'without her help and encouragement over sixty years I would not have achieved very much'. To her and his four children we extend our condolences.

I would like to thank David Harper and Tim Rich for reading the draft of this obituary.

DAVID STREETER

Publications of Francis Rose (1921–2006)

Prepared by T. C. G. Rich

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