

ANN CONOLLY
(1917–2010)

Born in 1917, Ann spent a comfortable childhood in Kenley, Surrey in a house with extensive gardens, which at one point boasted a Wryneck nesting at one end and a Red-backed Shrike at the other. Here she developed a great love and interest in plants that was to stay with her all her life. Privately educated, she attended a Montessori school in Purley, followed by Eothen Girls School in Caterham, where she was head girl 1934/5. The family travelled regularly to the Continent, and it was on one of these family holidays (probably in Aachen) in 1932, that Ann contracted Polio. This left her with a permanently weakened right leg, but this was not to be allowed to interfere with her love of the outdoors, the only concession being a trusty ash adder stick for uneven ground. From 1936 – 1940 she read Natural Sciences at Newnham College Cambridge, at a time when degrees were not awarded to women. Between 1940 and 1943 Ann was registered for a PhD in quaternary botany with Professor Harry Godwin at Cambridge, supported by a Rigby and a Francis Maitland Balfour studentship. However, whilst the research was more or less completed, the thesis was never submitted due to ‘war-time interruptions and involvements’, it did lead to some important papers. Among these ‘interruptions’ were periods spent fire watching on the roof of the university buildings. She recalls that the roof of the Agriculture faculty was dark and unprotected, and that they were made to test the Davis fire-escape from an upper floor – landing in a flower bed! New recruits to the team would be initiated by a torch-lit trip through Anatomy with skeletons hanging from the ceiling, and pickled human brains by the door! The roof of Pathology was given a wide berth, since the dogs were roaming loose and the door was labelled ‘Beware rabid dogs’. Even getting to her research site at Hawks’ Tor in Cornwall was not without its adventures. Ann recalls her first visit when she unwisely took the Tor Point Ferry (rather than the Saltash Bridge) and ended up on an empty country lane in the middle of nowhere; following a perilous pillion ride on a naval motor-bike to Liskeard, she just caught the last train to Bodmin where she was to be boarded by ‘friends of friends’. The daily routine was then an 8 mile round trip on a borrowed cycle to Hawks’ Tor pit. The return hitch to Cambridge, with a rucksack weighed down with many pounds of samples, required a rapid escape from an American Air Force lorry – once Ann realised she was the sole remaining passenger. In her last year at Cambridge Ann was so busy with part-time teaching commitments that she scarcely had time for any research. Her first teaching post was as a demonstrator at Bedford College for Women London, (initially with a Ministry of Labour Conditional Exemption from Military Service), where she spent a very active three years of botany teaching starting in 1944; just in time for the V2s! Apparently destined for a successful career in Quaternary botany, Ann was appointed to a lectureship at the then University College of Leicester in January 1947 (see photos 1 & 2).

However, Ann’s interests multiplied as time went on, expanding into two other significant aspects of the British Flora. The Flora of the Lley Peninsula was her life’s work, commenced in the early 1950s and continued as long as she was able to drive long distances. The Lley Peninsula is part of Caernarfonshire (v.c.49) and the area of the Ann’s Flora comprised Pwllheli and the area SW of a line formed by the A497 continued along the minor road into Morfa Nefyn. This covers only a small part of the vice county and doesn’t even include the whole of the Lley Peninsula. However, what it lacked in area was more than made up for by the thoroughness of the mapping (1km squares), the period of the recording (more than 50 years) and the interest of its localities (see photo 3). Ann’s base in the Lley was a remote cottage called Llys Hyfryd, in the hamlet of Pen-bodlas some 500masl at the base of Garn Fadryn (see photos 4 & 5). Always referred to as the ‘cottage’ it was in fact a small and comfortable farmhouse. Visitors (and there were many over the years) never paid for accommodation, but the kitchen cupboards used to accumulate choice preserves and delicacies from

grateful visitors. On longer visits, grass would be cut, wood fetched or hedges trimmed. Working in the garden was not without its perils for the uninitiated, since valuable plants (entire leaved *Lamium album* and the two long-suffering genuine Welsh Oak seedlings) lurked unobserved amongst the weeds! Twin perils were allowing the sheep into the garden or trampling sheep onto the antique Afghan rugs. The house was tastefully furnished with antique furniture (including the WW1 stretcher which long did service as a bed in the downstairs bedroom), and had a sitting room with a large open fire place. Instructions/house rules abounded 'do not kill the spiders' or 'do not open this window' - which some unwary Dutch students once did - only to find the catch promptly disintegrate. This also played an important role in the undergraduate Plant Geography fieldcourses that Ann ran for many years in the Lleyn, for the 'advance party' that would be billeted there for a few days prior to fieldcourse proper – which could certainly be a character forming experience. Access to the house was through a field and commanding views of the sea on both sides of the Peninsula were to be had from the upstairs windows. Ann always made a habit of shopping locally, and patronised the tiny shop at nearby Garn, until it closed on the elderly owner's retirement. The property also included several fields which were rented out to a local farmer for sheep grazing – my abiding memory is of mornings spent searching these fields for mushrooms to go with the smoked bacon that Ann had sizzling in the kitchen! Many the botanist who has blessed Ann for the comfortable free accommodation so generously offered in that idyllic spot. Ann knew the road system of the Lleyn like the back of her hand, and with company would invariably choose an 'interesting' back route. As she accelerated along the high banked single track roads she would gleefully explain that the faster you went the less likely you were to meet any traffic! Ann was supported in her endeavours by a series of long-suffering estate cars, originally Renault, and when that model was discontinued, a Ford. These cars were permanently full with the back seats down, and in addition to working files, waterproof clothing and food, contained all the equipment to cope with any weather event, from the bucket of ashes (+ shovel) to the bow-saw for clearing the road of fallen trees! Whilst the front seat could be cleared at fairly short notice, providing for a second passenger was a much more major undertaking! Unfortunately, the temptation for just one more recording season, her absolute perfectionism and her many other interests, meant that the Flora was never written up. However, her unique records are now in safe hands, and it is hoped that the Flora can still be published in some form in the future. Ann's boundless curiosity was at odds with increasingly highly focused collegiate research efforts; her 1974 CV lists no fewer than eight main research areas. Whilst this meant she had to spread herself a little thin, she nevertheless had dozens of scientific publications to her name, some of them highly cited. Ann was also very active in both the botany and the management of the Island of Bardsey (part of the Lleyn Peninsula) – visiting many times over the years, making the long boat trip in some very flimsy looking open boats. Through the work on the Flora, Ann developed other 'spin offs', the distribution of *Lamium album* (White Dead-nettle) in Wales, the distribution of the entire leaved form of this species, the association of medicinal plants with ancient habitation, and perhaps most significantly, the history and distribution of those large alien plants in the Dock family – most notably Japanese Knotweed (see photo 6). This culminated in her ground breaking 1977 *Polygonum* paper, which was based on a careful study of the literature and herbaria the length and breadth of the country. Ann always took the attitude that if a job was worth doing it was worth doing properly, and a chat to the Nefyn Gardeners' Association would receive the same attention to detail as would a lecture for a learned society. In the late 1970s the arrival of a new technician in the Botany Department led to a long-lived and extremely successful collaboration on Japanese Knotweed and all its works, happily crowned by the surprise publication of the name *Fallopia ×conollyana* in time for her 84th birthday.

I first met Ann in 1977 in the state of the art laboratories of the then Botany Department in the University of Leicester. Ann provided a stark contrast to the other members of staff, in their smart white lab coats, with her stout shoes, bare legs, tweed skirt, crumpled cardigan, and her long hair plaited and tied back. Her only ornament was the red and black stub of a 3B Staedtler pencil wedged behind one ear – “anything written with less than a 3B pencil being impossible to read”! Further, Miss Conolly, as she was respectfully known, had something of a reputation amongst the technical staff as a difficult and demanding person to work for. Her work area (at one end of an otherwise spotless Plant Physiology Lab), with its stereo-microscope surrounded by myriad jars, trays, boxes and plates filled with various archaeological sortings, also pointed to a certain independence of spirit. What particularly appealed to me about Ann was her tremendous sense of fun, the conspiratorial grin, healthy disrespect for authority and her tremendous botanical knowledge. Asked a question on any of her numerous areas of knowledge, one was assured that next day, a book would be produced, with apposite sections carefully bookmarked. Ann was not at her best in the morning, and woe-betide anyone who bothered her before a 09.30 lecture. She would regularly stay up into the early hours, even when not preparing lectures, much to the despair of her carers in her declining years. It cannot be denied that on occasion, Ann could have a somewhat sharp temper, along with a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later – leading to some rather stunned expressions from people unfamiliar with her. Such outbursts were usually of short duration and the twinkling eyes with their mischievous glint would soon return, as if nothing untoward had occurred.

Ann joined the BSBI in 1948 and was made an honorary member in 2009. This was a well-earned honour considering the enormous contribution she made over the years to the Exhibition Meetings and *Watsonia*. She was also one of the first recruits for the BSBI mapping scheme in the early 1950s and principal recorder for at least 6 10km squares in N. Wales. A regular at the Exhibition Meetings, she contributed 44 exhibits between 1955 and 2006 (see photo 7). In spite of her professional status and connections, Ann would genially start up a conversation with absolutely anyone she met, often discovering unexpected connections, and receiving new leads in her investigations. Ann dressed for comfort rather than style, and for many years at BSBI field meetings her slightly stooped figure holding her adder stick was a welcome and instantly recognisable sight (see photos 8 & 9).

Whilst maintaining a healthy disdain for many modern developments, Ann was no Luddite, and readily took to the scanning electron microscope for the examination of seed and leaf surfaces – both fossil and modern. She would spend many hours in company of EM staff, forever trying to focus their microscope (and attention) back on to the leaf/seed surface rather than some more decorative crystal or artefact to which they had strayed. In spite of all this work, I don't believe the main part of it was ever published, although it would regularly be used for displays and demonstrations. A prodigious correspondent, on retirement from the Botany Department at Leicester in 1982, Ann was presented with a portable electric typewriter, and most evenings would see her tapping away into the early hours in the herbarium prep room. When in her late 70's, a hand-me-down IBM PC with the DOS operating system appeared in the herbarium, Ann was quick to grasp the advantages of a word-processor over a typewriter. However, her mastery did not extend to the creation of new documents. Consequently Ann had one enormous document with dozens of letters, ongoing papers, notes etc. one after the other. At the beginning was a constantly updated index – since the page numbers changed each time new text was inserted. As the operating system predated on-screen editing, text put into bold or italic etc., appeared in different colours, which Ann naturally adopted for her own highlighting purposes. When this computer finally expired, Richard Gornall was left with the thankless task of trying to explain to an indignant Ann, why in the new version of the file (he had just painstakingly rescued for her), the vital highlighting colours had been replaced by bold underline etc! The computer nonetheless revolutionised the way she worked late in her life.

Ann Conolly led a remarkable and full life and made important contributions to botanical research. Ann continued with fieldwork for a considerable time, though did require a hand getting over 5 bar gates once she hit 80! At the age of 83 Ann, Catherine Pashley and I were in Leiden trying to collect samples of Japanese Knotweed as close as possible to the site of von Siebold's Garden of Acclimatisation, where it had been offered for sale in the mid C19. The site had long been redeveloped as housing, the river offering the only way of getting close enough. Unfortunately no motor boats were available to hire, so we had to make do with a rowing boat. We picked it up on a small river and had 500m to get used to it before entering the main channel. Catherine got rather worried at our lack of skill until Ann demonstrated how it should be done (see photo 10). This was just as well since ships of sea-going size were moored in the main channel.

Ann's brother Dennis predeceased her, and Ann is survived by two nieces and a number of great-nieces and nephews. In her later years we owe a great deal to Valerie Mayfield and her family, who worked so hard to care for Ann and keep her comfortable and secure in her own home. Ann's house in Oadby overflowed with piles of books and papers (none of which could be moved), and many years ago Ann employed Valerie to do some limited cleaning of the living areas. As Ann's health deteriorated, Valerie became more of a friend and companion, as well as keeping Ann well provided with home prepared meals. It was sad to observe the slow decline of this scholarly and personable lady – but Ann was one of the old school who took the indignities that old age heaps upon us with dignity – even the loss of her precious sight, through macular degeneration, was taken with great forbearance. By one of those curious coincidences that always fascinated, but never surprised Ann, her funeral (arranged by her nieces), took place in the very church that I had attended as a child, and the wake was next door to the former nursing home where I was born.

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Photo 1: Ann Conolly with colleagues from ?Bedford College in the Lake District in the mid-1940s. Photographer unknown.



Photo 2: A nice portrait shot of Ann at Swithland Woods in her teaching days.
Photographer and date unknown.



Photo 3: Ann with Bardsey in the background, taken at the Look Out, Uwchmynydd near
Aberdaron, a favourite spot of her's on account of Choughs and *Erodium maritimum*.
Photo J.P. Bailey © 2001



Photos 4 & 5: Two different views of Anne's 'cottage', Llys Hyfryd with one of her 'long-suffering estate cars' in the upper photo. Photos J.P. Bailey



Photo 6: Ann posing for a photo in an important clump of 8× *Fallopia* × *bohemica* at Dolgellau. Photo J.P. Bailey



Photo 7: Ann in combative mode in the herbarium at Leicester on the occasion of the EMAPI meeting at Loughborough in 2001. Picture Lajos Balogh



Photo 8: Lunch on Bardsey - Extra food could always be found in Ann's lunch tin for botanists who didn't bring lunch.
Photo Peter Hope Jones



Photo 9: Ann, with 'adder stick' on a BSBI field meeting.



Photo 10: Ann showing her companions how to row on a river in Leiden.
Photo Cat Pashley © 2001