

Liverpool Botanical Society - Parnassia Update

This brief newsletter is being sent out with especially those members in mind who are unable to attend meetings and may be unsure what is happening in the society.

The Good News

The Society is thriving and new members joining. A very warm welcome to them. We have a pleasant room in the museum for indoor meetings and ideal equipment. Thank you to the museum staff for making this possible for us.

The field meetings are well attended and a wide range of habitats covered. Special thanks go to all those prepared to lead meetings. Apart from taking responsibility on the day they have usually not only made preparatory visits to the site but followed up with research and a written report. For the last two seasons we have been able to join with the Merseyside Naturalist Association for some coach outings and this has enabled us to broaden our horizons. It has proved very popular with members and we are grateful to David Bryant for arranging this for us.

John Somerville has kindly set up an attractive, professional-looking website for the group and this is being constantly up-dated. Please do keep checking for latest details. For anyone not familiar with computers, local libraries do provide free access and there is usually a member of staff available and willing to help. The web address is easy to remember:

www.liverpoolbotanicalsociety.co.uk

This is a major asset to the society and enables us to be part of the hi-tech world.

The Newsletter 'Parnassia' has not been published for a while as explained below, but Steve Cross has now taken over as editor and has been gathering all the Indoor meeting and Field meeting reports together. He says he is now winning in this mammoth task, so many thanks for taking this on Steve.

The sad news

Since the last edition of Parnassia the group has suffered a huge loss in the death of Vera Gordon and more recently Keith Watson.

Brief accounts of their lives and contributions to the society have been read out at meetings but are printed below for the benefit of any other members who knew them.

Vera Gordon (1918 - 2006)

Vera was born in Bootle and attended the local school, later winning a scholarship to the grammar school. In those days it was not usual for girls to go on to University and she left school at the age of 16, having excelled in maths and science.

Vera went on to work in an accounts department until war broke out. She then applied to join the Women's Land Army hoping to 'Dig for Victory'. Instead she was sent to the Royal Ordnance Department to use her accounting skills. This had the advantage of automatic entrance to the Civil Service, so she had a secure job after the war. She became a clerk in the Law Courts and was highly respected - with some staff admitting to being frightened of her. Having been bombed out of their house in Bootle the family had moved to Waterloo where Vera continued to live until her last few months.

Work was only one part of Vera's life. From an early age she had been taken on walks with her parents, brother and dog. She remembered being fascinated by plants from the age of four, and by six years old she was asking for a picnic in a cowslip field as her birthday treat.

Her father was a keen photographer and met the botanist Dr. C. T. Green at the photographic society meetings. He mentioned Vera's interest in plants and through this introduction she joined the slightly over-powering group of mainly male members in the L.B.S. whilst she was still a schoolgirl. So began her 70 years membership of the society with 60 of these as honorary secretary.

The society of course had been founded with the aim of collecting and publishing data on local plants. This ambition was not realised for many years largely for financial reasons..... (What's new?) Mr. Travis had played a major part in the work and his death in 1958 inspired a renewed effort. Apart from fieldwork Vera undertook to check plant records and with Dr. Savage and Prof. Heywood saw the book through the press in 1963. Travis's Flora of South Lancashire which was widely distributed must therefore stand as one of Vera's lasting achievements.

In addition to this she was a valued member of the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) and recorder for South Lancashire for many years. Her contributions to botany were acknowledged by Liverpool University in 1987 when she was given an honorary degree. She continued to receive invitations to all major University functions for the rest of her life. The L.B.S. gave her honorary membership when she retired as secretary - she had always refused it earlier, and finally the B.S.B.I. made her an honorary member in 2005.

most people will remember Vera for her infectious enjoyment of plants and meetings, her willingness to share her knowledge and her wide experience of different countries as reflected in her talks. Vera had a particular interest in mountains and was a keen member of the Scottish Rock Garden and the Alpine Garden Society. Her wonderful photographic skills enabled her to capture plants in their natural environment. For over 30 years she had travelled on holiday through much of Europe, also to Asia, North America, South Africa and Australia. Letters and occasional gifts show how much others had appreciated having her in their group. "To a real enthusiast" ran one inscription in a book, given after Vera had persuaded others to learn 6 plants a day from the exotic flora around them!

It is not possible to do justice here to her interest in animals, Scottish dancing, fair-isle knitting, dressmaking (or anorak-making), drawing and painting, but she had many gifts. Only needing 4 or 5 hours sleep a night at least gave her extra time for these activities!

For many years Vera botanised with her friend Anne Swinney and then Pat Lockwood joined them. Thanks to Pat's own knowledge and interest, combined with Vera's influence, we continue to benefit in the society from someone bubbling over with enthusiasm and always willing to help others name and enjoy plants.

The L.B.S. felt it would be appropriate to remember Vera by planting a tree in Ness Gardens. *Quercus robur* was chosen as a native plant and one said to support more life than any other. Vera's brother did the honours and planted the tree on March 15th of this year and other members added their spadeful of soil. We hope that visitors to these gardens will enjoy seeing Vera's tree grow and mature. The late Professor Corner of Cambridge University said of a previous member of the L.B.S. "Ah! but he is an *amateur* botanist - one in whom the light shines brightest." This surely could be said of Vera too.

A Burns Night supper.

Photograph supplied
by Pat Lockwood.



But back to the present.

Following someone who has made the job of L.B.S. secretary her own for 60 years must be an incredibly hard act to follow. Full credit to Wendy Atkinson for being prepared to take on such a task and rising to the challenge. The present success of the society gives ample evidence of how well she is fulfilling this demanding role. Very many thanks Wendy, and we all send good luck for your eye operation. We will be thinking about you on 27th.

The following account was read out to members at the March 2008 L.B.S. meeting.

Geoffrey Keith Watson (1946 - 2008)

Keith grew up in Scarborough with two younger brothers, John and Eric. It seems he was happy and outgoing. At 14 his life changed however. He suffered a very severe attack of meningitis which almost killed him. Following this he became quite shy, withdrawn and lacking in confidence, but he did well academically and went on to University.

He was awarded his Ph.D. for bacteriology from Newcastle University in 1973 and then moved to the Wirral Peninsula to take up a research post with Unilever in Port Sunlight. He first worked on washing powders and was interested in trying to develop a product which worked well at low temperatures. The aim was to help those in developing countries who had to use river water. Later he moved to the toothpaste department and back to his petri dishes. He said his main contribution in this field was putting the stripe into toothpaste. The company sent him abroad for a number of conferences and Keith himself had the experience of lecturing in Calgary.

He joined the Wirral Chess Club where he was highly thought of as a player, and became their treasurer for 29 years. They were planning on giving him an award in a few months time to mark 30 years of conscientious service.

Keith joined the Liverpool Botanical Society in 1974 and was a very keen member of this and the B.S.B.I. He could always be relied upon to have the large C.T.W. and later Stace in his rucksack to deal with queries on all the field meetings. Presently he began to lead some of the excursions, and following early retirement he attended the winter indoor meetings too. He served as President of the Society from 2004 - 2007 and was editor of 'Parnassia' as well as being treasurer.

Keith never sought the limelight and was willing for anyone to use his results. He enjoyed the freedom which his car gave him and became familiar with the plants of Cheshire and North Wales. He recorded for Jean Green, Graham Kaye and others over many years as well as leading some B.S.B.I. meetings.

In the early 1980's he was employed by the BBC to go out to Borneo for the David Attenborough 'Life on Earth' series. Among his finds was where the black buds of the parasite *Rafflesia* had opened to display the largest flower in the world for them to film. This was followed by further assignments, but Keith did not mention any of this himself and we only learnt of it now from his family.

In the past Keith had enjoyed holidays in many parts of the world and particularly liked the Mediterranean region. He is especially remembered by some B.S.B.I. members from a botanical holiday in Crete. In recent years however he was content to stay at home but continued with a number of projects. For instance he recorded every day to day change in the same stretch of hedgerow for a whole season - from time of leaves and flowers opening to butterflies emerging and birds hatching. Useful data no doubt for climate change studies. For the last 18 months, he went out once a week with some L.B.S. members Maria, John and Pat. All this was interrupted when he went to bed this February, with rucksack packed at the side ready for an early start next morning, and suffered a massive heart attack in the night.

Keith will certainly be very much missed. We have lost a perfect gentleman and a dedicated botanist.

The suddenness left us without an editor or treasurer for the last A.G.M. From the time Peter Gateley contacted the police some members took on a great deal of extra work, from helping to clear the house to dealing with the hassle of bank formalities. We are grateful to all of them. Peter Gateley, Wendy Atkinson, John Edmondson, Maria Knowles, Pat Lockwood, John Somerville, Peter Tipping and Steve Cross were very much involved in sorting everything out. Now Peter Tipping has taken over as treasurer and as mentioned earlier Steve Cross is putting together the reports for *Parnassia*. Eric Greenwood has been able to advise on the correct procedures to follow and this led to calling the Extraordinary General Meeting in the summer. A great team effort all round.

The next meeting

The indoor meeting on December 13th will be a talk about our local shorelines by Dr. George Russell. Judging by the work he has written up, this will be well worth giving up an hour of Christmas shopping for.

Finally a big thank you to all the members who attend the indoor and field meetings and especially those who show their support by turning up on the wettest days of our British summers.

The brochure with details of the next season's meetings will be sent out in the New Year.

J.B.V.