

In Memoriam



Peter Derek SELL

(1 November 1929 – 10 October 2013)

Peter Sell, one of the most gifted British taxonomists of the last half century, deserves to be better known for his substantial contribution to the study of the European flora. He was not an Editor of *Flora Europaea*, but his thorough taxonomic and nomenclatural research and the masterly generic accounts he wrote were a major element in the success of that project. He also compiled the indexes to the five volumes, a complex and vital task. He possessed an intimate knowledge of the British Flora, but always within its wider European context.

Peter Sell devoted his life and career to plant taxonomy. He joined the staff of the Botany School, University of Cambridge, aged only 14, working in the Herbarium (CGE) until he retired in 1997. Within a year of arrival, as there was then no Curator he was effectively in charge and Professor F.T. Brookes made the wise decision to pay for this enthusiastic young man to receive Latin lessons. In 1948–1949 he was away on military service, then on his return settled down to work in successful partnership with the recently appointed Dr S. Max Walters (1920–2005, Curator 1949–1973). Peter Sell thus became intimately involved in the preparatory work for *Flora Europaea*, at its heart a Cambridge project. When in 1973 Walters became Director of the Botanic Garden, Peter Sell was promoted to Assistant Curator of the Herbarium, and the arrival as Curator in 1974 of Dr David Briggs, with wide research interests in genecology and evolution, established another fruitful partnership between herbarium and experimental garden. Sell, Briggs and Walters did indeed form a companionable, stimulating and productive team, a significant element of what many of us remember as a ‘Golden Age’ of Botany in Cambridge.

Even after official retirement Peter Sell continued to study the Herbarium’s collections, which were the basis for his *Flora of Great Britain and Ireland* (1996–2014) written with his long-time assistant and collaborator Gina Murrell. As well, they collected over 30,000 of their

own UK plant specimens, which are lodged in the herbarium. He travelled widely in Britain, especially in search of hawkweeds (*Hieracium*), a lifelong interest, and also collected in Ireland, France, Spain, Italy, Malta, former Yugoslavia and parts of Central Europe. He made a substantial contribution to the classic *Atlas of the British Flora* (1962), especially the *Critical Supplement* (with F.H. Perring, 1968), and among his other publications were most of Asteraceae sub-family Cichorioideae for *Flora Europaea*, accounts of *Hieracium* and other Asteraceae for *Flora of Turkey*, and numerous shorter papers on a great range of genera. He was, for example, an expert on brambles (*Rubus*) and fumitories (*Fumaria*).

Peter Sell lived almost his whole life in Bassingbourn, a village south of Cambridge, where his family farmed, and where from boyhood he was able to immerse himself in country life. In 2000, after an unfortunate period of ill-health, he moved to his son's family home, eventually settling with them in Cambridge. A keen sportsman in his youth, he much enjoyed walking and shooting, and took a great interest in all aspects of the countryside and farming. He had a wide interest in natural history and was a knowledgeable bird watcher.

He was a friendly, kind and humorous man, although he largely kept himself apart from the taxonomic and academic world, including the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) to whom he was a living legend, instead waiting for people to come to him for advice or discussion. He was admirably capable of single-minded devotion to his work and, if he were studying a taxonomic problem he would allow nothing to distract him. However, he would always stop for Botany School coffee and tea breaks, often contributing a plate of his favourite Chelsea buns – sticky dough rolls embedded with raisins, flavoured with cinnamon and exuding syrup.

His great *Flora*, packed with information and covering intraspecific variation in so much detail, is the culmination of that lifetime of hard work, and a fitting memorial. As a *Flora* writer he liked to work from living or herbarium specimens, rather than relying on the published work of others, and his knowledge of European taxonomic and floristic literature, and intraspecific variation and taxonomy, were remarkable. Typification of taxa was one of his particular skills.

Fortunately for his colleagues, he was ever free with information and many of us learned our trade in taxonomy working alongside him. He helped PhD students with any queries they might have on literature or taxonomic practice, and took an active interest in their research. He was incisive in his analysis of the works of others, and could readily spot and nurture talent in young botanists. He wrote well, and his semi-popular articles, obituaries and book reviews were much praised.

Although Peter Sell was not able to attend the 3rd *Flora Europaea* Symposium in Bucharest and Cluj in 1963 – sadly he never visited Romania – the botanists of this country made a deep impression on him. Of all the European Floras he held J. Săvulescu's *Flora Republicii Populare Române/Flora Republicii Socialiste România* in the greatest regard, with its full coverage, including alien and apomictic species, comprehensive descriptions, details of intraspecific variation and taxonomy, and elegant illustrations. Peter Sell's own critical *Flora* well reflects and upholds those high standards.

We fondly remember a good friend and mentor, great Englishman and great European botanist.

John AKEROYD