

## MARGARET BURNHILL

1928-2021

Margaret Burnhill was one of those people who, once you had met her you didn't forget and she met a great many people, in particular botanists and ornithologists both on the Island and across the country. Each will have their own story to tell about Margaret. It is remarkable the number of botanists and ornithologists across the country, many of them highly regarded experts, who have come across Margaret at one time or another. She will be remembered for her outspoken, forthright nature.

Margaret Burnhill was born on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1928 in Wakefield, Yorkshire, but then moved to Staines, outside of London. Her father was a keen hobby gardener and taught Margaret about plants. He had left school at the age of 14 and worked hard all his life. When he retired, he was diagnosed with cancer and was an invalid for four years before he died. He was outlived by Margaret's mother, who was sickly all her life and suffered from TB. She spent 6 months at Ventnor Hospital. Her aunt, Muriel Brunskill, who was born in Kendal, was a famous contralto of the early twentieth century, working with many of the leading musicians of her day.

Margaret went to school at Harrow Weald County School. She had to do all the shopping and housekeeping for her mother. Because of TB in the family, other children avoided her from fear of contracting the disease so she was always a loner at school. She put this down to her independence and strange character in later life!

Because they lived in outer London, she was not evacuated during the War but, in 1944, she was posted to Westmorland when doodlebugs were presenting too great a risk to stay at home and her school was closed. She stayed with maternal grandparents in Kendal and when not in school, spent her spare time cycling around the Lakes, where she saw *'many of the flowers we do not get in the south.'*

Her diary for 14<sup>th</sup> August 1944 records a cycle ride of 85 miles taking in Ambleside, Buttermere, Keswick, Derwent Water and the Honiston Pass. She wrote in her diary,

*'From Keswick, I went down to the lakeside but then turned back and found the road to the footpath to Watendlath and, on reaching a high spot where the rocks dropped sheer to the water, I ate my lunch. Although it was wartime, there was a launch on the lake with a crowd of people on it.'* Referring to the Honiston Pass, she wrote, *'After pushing the bike up a very steep hill for more than a mile, it was very annoying to find that you are "strongly advised to walk down the other side"'. This grim warning was accompanied by two very battered cycle wheels hanging on the notice.'*

Margaret trained as a Physical Education teacher and taught PE at various schools in England before taking a post at Southampton Grammar School for Girls where the botany teacher rekindled her interest in plants and introduced her to many botanists. She was a rapid learner and she joined the Wild Flower Society and was introduced to Mary McCallam Webster, a self-taught botanist who became one of the leading British field botanists at the time.

Members of the Wild Flower Society were expected to keep a Wild Flower Record Book and set themselves the goal of seeing and, more importantly, correctly identifying as many different wild flowers as possible. There were rules about this. To count as a tick, the plant had to be in flower, unless a sedge or rush when a fruiting specimen would do. Ferns were counted as honorary flowers but had to be producing spores to count. These rules were relaxed around 1926 allowing one to touch a plant to add to your score, rather than pick or press it. Those who managed, usually over the best part of a lifetime, to see around 2000 species, became members of a caste apart in a special branch of the Society called Valhalla, the Elysian fields of British botany. Those even more seriously addicted dwelt in the clouds in another section called Parnassus. Margaret was very proud when she was eventually entered into the caste of Parnassus; she became one of the few field botanists to have seen more than 3000 taxa in UK. In fact, her score was 3,147 taxa putting her in the top five!

Margaret moved from Southampton, taking up a post as PE teacher at Fairway Secondary Modern School, Sandown and buying a house in Brighstone. She immediately became involved in recording flowering plants on the Island. Meanwhile, Margaret had become friendly with Norris Adamson, an ornithologist who she referred to as Andy. When she first met him, she described him as being 'as old as my mother' and she had no desire to form a relationship but she grew very fond of him, they moved in together and they had ten years together before he died. She took him away on walking holidays often in Scotland, which she particularly enjoyed visiting.

Andy 'tolerated' Margaret's plant hunting expeditions, whose botanising adventures in search of rare plants were recorded in her diaries. Their journeys included expeditions to Teesdale, They stayed at Hetherbrae, a small hotel at Nethybridge in the Cairngorms, in August 1974 was one such expedition. On the way up, they visited the botanical mecca of Teesdale and she records:

*1<sup>st</sup> August. On the way up to Cow Green near the cattle grid we saw a family of red grouse with Mrs red grouse... They were most attractive creatures and beautifully marked. We parked the car in the park above the reservoir and walked down the metalled track to the dam and Cauldron Snout...*

We could see the party at work under Margaret Bradshaw down near the reservoir but I did not stop to speak to them... However, while we were walking back along the track I did manage to find *Viola rupestris* (Teesdale Violet) in fruit, which I had not managed before.

They stayed at Hetherbrae, a small hotel at Nethybridge in the Cairngorms, which was to be a favourite location for Margaret until it closed in 2007, and the hub of the local community although on this occasion the hotel was being renovated and they were the only guests. She wrote:

3<sup>rd</sup> August After a very good breakfast, we went straight in Forres to meet Mary McCallum Webster. After coffee and a bit of chat she took us to Culbin Sands. We found plenty of *Pyrola minor* (Common Winter green), *Orthilia secunda* (Serrated Wintergreen), which was new to me, *Centaureum littorale* (Seaside Centaury) and many other beauties which I have seen before. Mary had lent us a bottle of anti-fly spray and it was much needed as the horseflies were fearsome and I was bitten several times. From the shore, where we looked perfunctorily for *Mertensia* (Oysterplant), we saw hundreds, possibly thousands, of oystercatchers passing over. They were flying westwards and we wondered if they were migrating in such numbers.

Back at Forres, we sat in the carpark for a while and saw Mary come in her van so, when she had shopped, we followed her back to her home in Dyke. On the way we passed plenty of cornflowers all along the edges of several cornfields; they are a lovely blue. We had a very nice meal and a prolonged look round her wonderful garden. It is not only attractive but she has masses of most interesting plants. The cottage is full of shells, cones, pieces of driftwood and drying flowers everywhere. She does 'floral art' and makes pressed flower pictures for the shows and makes funds for her World Wildlife etc. We sorted out a space for each of us to sit and enjoyed the meal. Then we went in to Nairn golf course and the two of us walked while Andy had a rest in the car. She showed me *Euphrasia foulensis* (Foula Eyebright), *Carex scandinavica* (Small-fruited Yellow Sedge) and *Blymus rufus* (Saltmarsh Flat-sedge). This last is much more delicate than *B. compressus* (Flat-sedge) which we have on Breamore Common, otherwise it looks very much the same. There was also *Rubus insularis* (a Bramble micro-species) which was new to me. We went back to Nethybridge straight from Nairn and got back about 9.30 and slunk upstairs to our beds.

On their final trip, Margaret took Andy up Ben Lawers. He was struggling but she encouraged him to complete the climb. At the top, he sat down amongst the Alpine Gentians and said, 'If I die now, I will be happy'. He died three months later.

Margaret was assiduous in attending meetings of the Wild Flower Society and BSBI across the country as well as Butterfly Conservation and other natural history meetings and attending Field Studies Council courses. In doing so, she met very many botanists and natural historians. She could not tolerate dogs and would wait in her car as people assembled in order to make sure no-one arrived with a dog in tow, in which case she would drive away even if she had travelled across the country for the meeting.

As well as recording plants, in the 1970s Margaret collaborated with the Isle of Wight School Science Service which provided science education material to school at all levels across the Island. She wrote and illustrated a series of booklets for school children in the series 'Know your Island'. The titles of these were Trees, Spring Flowers, Grasses, Ferns, Seaweeds, Common Birds in Winter and Houses.

Margaret's botanical recording contributed to the original Atlas of the British Flora (1962) and its successor, the New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora (2000) for which she submitted over two thousand records. In 2000, Margaret embarked single handedly on a botanical survey of all the churchyards and cemeteries on the Island which she subsequently typed up into a booklet. These activities have produced a great many valuable Island botanical records. She also ran a moth trap in her garden for many years.

Away from her botanical work, Margaret was a keen golfer and supported the WI. She pressed flowers which she would make up into designs for cards which she could sell, a skill she had picked up from her friendship with Mary McCallum Webster. She attended second-hand markets to look for ceramic frogs of which she built up a large collection over the years. Eric Clement remembers giving her some frogs for her collection. At her funeral there was a congregation of around sixty people, many of whom were not known to each other. I guess that is a mark of her diverse interests and how many people were touched by her in different ways over her life.



Margaret (seated on the left) with members of the Botany Group in Brighstone Churchyard March 2004.

**Author:** Colin Pope