

Obituary

E. JOAN GIBBONS
(1902—1988)

When Joan Gibbons died on 2 December 1988, Lincolnshire lost a lady who had dominated the botany of her adopted county for over 50 years, and the B.S.B.I. and the Wild Flower Society one of their most dedicated and hard-working members.

Joan Gibbons was born in Essex but, at the age of five, moved with her family to Holton-le-Moor, 16 miles north-east of Lincoln where her father, Rev. Thomas Gibbons, had inherited an estate. In these rural surroundings, six miles from the small town of Market Rasen, she soon developed an interest in wild flowers stimulated by her father who took her to her first Lincolnshire Naturalists' Union meeting when she was only eleven: thus began a pursuit which she followed avidly for the rest of her life. She joined the L.N.U. when she was 18 and became Botanical Secretary in 1936, a position she held for nearly 50 years, and had the distinction of being elected President of the L.N.U. for the first time in 1939 when she was still in her thirties.

Miss Gibbons joined the B.S.B.I. in 1946 and, almost immediately, was appointed Recorder for the two Lincolnshire vice-counties – a duty which she performed with thoroughness and accuracy for the next 40 years: without her our knowledge of the flora of that enormous county, second only to Yorkshire in size (and divided into five v.cc.), would be poor indeed and her contribution to the B.S.B.I. Distribution Maps Scheme is inestimable. Arguably she made the single largest voluntary contribution – certainly in England. The task which faced her in 1954 was formidable – 90 10-km squares and very few local members to call on for support (the B.S.B.I.'s *Year Book* for 1952 listed only two!). But by dogged determination, in sensible shoes with her felt hat firmly pinned in place and with the welcome assistance of Brenda and Leaver Howitt in the west and of John Chandler in the south, she worked her way up and down and across the county until, by 1960, recording in Lincolnshire was as good as, if not better, than the rest of the country.

Her *forte* though was not just current field records: Miss Gibbons was a wonderful gatherer of information from the past – both botanical and human. During the ten years of the Maps Scheme she sent in information, species by species, each on a separate sheet of identical lined paper, which included a full account of their distribution as well as charming biographical sketches of the Recorders, especially if they were clergymen.

The value of this dual interest is exemplified by this extract from the introductory pages to her *Supplement to the Flora of Lincolnshire* (1985) “[Rev. E. A. Woodruffe Peacock] dated the herbarium 1835 unfortunately, which was unlikely as Susan Skipworth would only have been 11 years old. Very few of the 300+ specimens are localised unfortunately but of those which are, about 20 of them are from Cleethorpes, Claxby Wood, Grantham and Kidderminster. Her sisters were married and living at Claxby and Kidderminster. Other plants which are present are likely to be from South Kelsey where she was born and brought up, until she married in 1858, John Lewis Ffych of Thorpe Hall, Louth, a noted antiquary. Her cousin, Mary Elizabeth Dixon of Caistor, kept a Withering's Botany . . .”

This of course post-dates her major achievement – *The flora of Lincolnshire* published in 1975. It was the first Flora of the county, the first full Flora of an English county to be written by a woman, and the county Flora that covers the single largest area (there has never been a complete Flora of Yorkshire). The Lincolnshire Naturalists' Union marked the occasion by electing her as President for a second term, the first woman to be honoured in this way.

In 1948 the Conservation sub-committee of the L.N.U. separated to become the Lincolnshire Naturalists' Trust. Joan Gibbons was a founder member of its Council and, had she not died on the day of the 40th Anniversary celebrations of the Trust, would have been one of only four of that original group of enthusiastic conservationists to survive. Her botanical knowledge was of enormous value to the Trust in establishing its early Nature Reserves and, more recently (1988) in publishing a *Red Data Report* for the county. She herself undertook the rescue of *Iris spuria* when its sites

became threatened and transported material to Cambridge University Botanic Gardens where it survives to this day.

Joan Gibbons was a remarkable lady: not only did she take to the fields dressed for botany, but she was also a Guider – Assistant County Secretary for 28 years and County Secretary for handicapped Guides. During the war she helped the then Lindsey and Holland Rural Community Council with the collection of medicinal herbs and rosehips.

In 1972, on the death of her brother and after 60 years at Holton-le-Moor, Miss Gibbons moved, with her two surviving sisters, to Northlands House, Glentworth. There her interest in family history developed even more strongly as she worked on the Codd and Key families which had both lived in the house, and she was a prominent member of the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology. She was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London in 1969.

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