

Obituary

DOUGLAS HENRY KENT
(1920–1998)

With the death on 9 September 1998 of Douglas Kent - “Duggie”, or sometimes “Doug”, as he was known to his friends and to British botanists more generally - the B.S.B.I. has lost the last surviving member of the team whose devoted efforts largely sustained the Society at a high level of efficiency throughout its great expansion of the early post-war years, and who were responsible for putting in hand many of the activities that continue to be among its principal features today. Though too self-effacing by nature to enjoy the prominence of the pair with whom he formed such a memorable triumvirate, J. E. Lousley and J. G. Dony, his services to the Society were fully as great and no less varied while also extending over the even lengthier period of 48 years without a break.

Duggie was born on 21 March 1920 in south Hammersmith, the only child of Ernest Edmund and Millie Louise Kent, and from the age of six lived for the rest of his life at 75 Adelaide Road in the nearby Borough of Ealing. After attending Bordeston Secondary School in Boston Manor, where he was a contemporary of Charles Hawtreys of ‘Carry On’ fame, he left at fifteen to join the Gas, Light and Coke Company (subsequently, after nationalisation, to constitute the core of North Thames Gas) and remained with that for his entire career, latterly heading a section responsible for mains and pipelines supplies. The fact that his home and work place were both within easy reach of the libraries and collections at Kew and South Kensington was to be an inestimable boon and substantially influenced the pattern of his life.

A born collector, Duggie might easily have been lost to botany because of competing youthful passions for philately and train-spotting. Luckily, however, while those persisted (he left a sizeable stamp collection and many notebooks on the G.W.R.), they failed to suppress a developing interest in plants. By the age of nineteen botany had taken so firm a grip that he embarked upon the amassing of records for his home county of Middlesex, drastically altered by the relentless sprawl of London since the days of Trimen and Dyer’s *Flora* of 1869. To that end he set about exploring the promising habitats that still remained and spent many hours in libraries investigating the work and lives of the many who had preceded him in that task. At no other time in his life were his burrowings to take him so extensively into the manuscript domain, in particular the vast Sloane collection in what was then the British Museum at Bloomsbury.

The outbreak of war in 1939 fortunately provided no serious interruptions to botany. Military service was ruled out for him (due to ill-health and/or his ‘reserved’ occupation) and, apart from serving as an air raid warden (no light responsibility during the London blitz), he was free to slip out of the city in summer as often as he could manage. That was not without its wartime risks, as several of his botanical contemporaries also discovered. On one occasion his fieldwork accidentally took him a foot or two inside the perimeter of an army camp; an over-zealous N.C.O. promptly shouted to a sentry to arrest him and he ended up with that day’s haul emptied out of his vasculum on to the guard-room floor, to the picturesque bafflement of his captors.

Towards the end of the war his botanical activity took a marked leap forward: he began a herbarium in 1943 and joined both the London Natural History Society and the Botanical Society and Exchange Club (as the B.S.B.I. was then still known) in 1944. Around that time he gained his introduction to Lousley, who was to become his friend and special mentor, and to another future close friend and collaborator, E. B. Bangerter. He also met and was given much encouragement by the veteran H. W. Pugsley, the most respected amateur taxonomist of British flowering plants of his generation. Austere and rather forbidding on first acquaintance, Pugsley was ever on the lookout for youthful promise and invited his protégé to dinners at his Wimbledon home, occasions which Duggie still spoke of with awe half a lifetime later.

It was also in that same year, 1944, that marriage to Ivy Minnie Austen brought his one lasting connection to somewhere other than Middlesex. They had met earlier when Ivy, a nurse, had been attending to him during a spell in hospital in London. After marriage, Ivy moved to 75 Adelaide Road and they lived on the upper floor over his parents. Their only child, Michael, was born two

years later. His wife came from Blean, near Canterbury, and from 1943 vice-county 15 began to find reflection in his incipient herbarium. On his visits there from 1945 to 1947 he was also able to give much help to F. Rose, then actively engaged on a projected Flora of Kent, and the two often made forays together both there and in Middlesex. It must be a matter for regret that the considerable expertise he acquired as a field botanist was never deployed more widely. Although holidays were subsequently to take him to several parts of Britain (Devon and Cornwall, Derbyshire, Shropshire, Yorkshire, the Lake District, mid and north Wales, and in 1971 to Scotland), those were more or less strictly family affairs, except that plant lists from many of these destinations found their way into his notebooks. He never once travelled overseas and very rarely attended a field meeting or conference if it involved a night away from home.

The London N.H.S. was the body with which he principally identified to begin with. Three years after joining, his first paper, reporting the many records of interest made in Middlesex since 1939, appeared in its journal. The year after that he was elected Chairman of its large Botanical Section, and subsequently he agreed as well to act as the Society's Honorary Curator; he relinquished this post in 1955 but continued to act as curator until 1961. His most conspicuous involvement, though, was as co-author with Lousley of an updated list of the vascular plants recorded within the L.N.H.S.'s official area (20 miles radius from St Paul's Cathedral), brought out serially between 1951 and 1957 as supplements to *The London Naturalist*. Increasing absorption into the B.S.B.I.'s affairs, however, compelled him to resign both his offices in 1955 and thereafter his L.N.H.S. links were largely confined to continuing to use its journal as the outlet for his steady stream of papers on the flora of Middlesex or Inner London.

Involvement with the B.S.B.I. followed at first a similar pattern. He was soon reporting in Plant Notes aliens new to the British list that he and others were then turning up in the grounds of a soya processing factory at Harefield, and following those up with papers in quick succession on the Middlesex flora. In 1948 the first list of Local Secretaries and Recorders to appear after the war showed him as having agreed to act in those two capacities for v.c. 21 (he was still its Recorder at the end of his life, the longest to have served a vice-county in either capacity to date), and in March 1950 he was rated an active enough member to be put forward for and elected to Council.

Three years later, at the instance of Lousley, who had meanwhile become Honorary General Secretary, he was asked to step in as Honorary Assistant Secretary when W. R. Price had to resign at short notice due to the ill health of his wife. The duties attached to this post were twofold: dealing with applications for membership, and the much more onerous one of editing the original *Year Book*, then about to be published for the fifth and last time. In his editorial to that final issue, in September 1953, Duggie was able to announce that a twice-yearly *Proceedings* was taking its place. The editorship of that now fell to him. The new journal, besides publishing papers, book reviews and obituaries, absorbed all the matter that had appeared in the *Year Book*, such as reports of field and exhibition meetings, and from *Watsonia* it took over Plant Records, Plant Notes and Abstracts from Literature. It was soon apparent that his natural meticulousness made him an effective editor and, while he interpreted that role for the most part responsively, prepared to publish most of the material that flowed in, he refused to be dictated to by the Publications Committee about the journal's contents and all along insisted on his editorial prerogative to accept what he saw fit. He likewise resisted pressure to change to a firm of printers with a less antiquated type-face, rightly fearful of the damaging increase in cost that that would involve and personally attuned to the relaxed way in which Buncle's operated (which included accepting copy in his exceptionally readable handwriting).

That twelve years' spell as editor of *Proceedings* had one outstandingly important by-product: it confirmed his enduring commitment to abstracting. He had displayed a penchant for that as early as 1950, in a one-off contribution to *The London Naturalist*. Two years later he proved willing to take over the burden of the B.S.B.I.'s annual equivalent in *Watsonia* from A. H. G. Alston's by then sagging shoulders. As soon as Abstracts was transferred to *Proceedings* he took the opportunity to make the coverage more complete and its appearances more frequent (twice yearly), convinced that through this service alone the Society would attract considerably more overseas members. Though a number of others, most notably E. B. Bangerter for a period, assisted him with contributions, he realised that the bulk of the work had to be done by a single individual if the coverage was to be other than fragmentary and over-selective.

When he eventually handed over *Proceedings* to E. F. Greenwood, in 1966, he was fortunately content to carry on with abstracting. When, only three years later, the Society found it no longer

possible financially to go on supporting two journals, compelling the absorption of *Proceedings* by *Watsonia* - a move hastened, ironically, by the ballooning of the Abstracts section consequent upon the freeing of Duggie from his editorial reins - it was universally agreed that this much-appreciated service that he had built up so assiduously must be preserved come what may. By switching to a cheaper mode of production, dropping the attempt to cover plant ecology and the flora of other western European countries, and publishing no more than bare titles in many more cases, *BSBI Abstracts* was thereupon turned into a feasible proposition, making its first appearance in May 1971 and lasting (so far) for 28 years. This must have done much to allay the deep disappointment he felt at the abandonment of the journal on which he had laboured so long and so hard. When it is remembered that for 46 years *Abstracts* has been the work of essentially just one person, a person moreover unable to read any language other than English, the sheer magnitude of his effort and achievement in that direction is little short of stunning. His unrivalled knowledge of the literature made Duggie the obvious choice to survey progress in British plant taxonomy for two early *Flora Europaea* conferences.

It was Duggie's desire for as complete a coverage as possible in his Abstracts that led him to begin the weekly trips to the library at Kew, a habit which soon turned him into such a familiar figure in that institution. There he made many friends and began a long association with R. K. Brummitt, with whom he discussed matters of common nomenclatural and abstracting interest; they were co-compilers of *Index to European Taxonomic Literature* for 1969 and 1970. His work at Kew proved of such mutual benefit that Duggie was appointed to an Honorary Research Fellowship at Kew in 1995, an honour very rarely bestowed on an amateur botanist. He also became equally well known and formed many enduring friendships at The Natural History Museum, in his later years visiting it once a fortnight and Kew once a week.

Despite his enormous devotion to *BSBI Abstracts*, this was very far from being his only activity on behalf of the Society. Until 1965 he combined editing *Proceedings* with continuing to shoulder a whole range of unglamorous 'back-room' chores of the kind so crucial to the efficient functioning of any society of this kind and size. These included handling applications for membership, keeping up the address list and dealing with orders for the Society's publications and enquiries about advertising in them, while also serving on Council *ex officio* and on three of the six permanent working committees. And, though committees were never his *forte* and he was seldom vocal on them, he was always most conscientious in attending their meetings. It should not be overlooked either that his name featured on the Panel of Referees and Specialists for several subjects and genera. As a further service he also compiled a card-index of books desired by members, and he invited enquiries. The very least the Society could do, by way of recognition for this unparalleled performance, was to elect him to Honorary Membership - and that it duly did at the A.G.M. of 1966.

Meanwhile, quite apart from a steady flow of papers in journals, he was busily accumulating material for several more major works. As he would have been the first to recognise, he was an almost compulsive compiler: he liked nothing so much as hunting down and extracting innumerable items of information and creating out of the resulting mass a useful volume of reference. He worked fast because he was content to plough shallowly, his one failing being that he was over-inclined to take statements on trust. It was the process of accumulation that he particularly revelled in: arrangement and analysis came very much second and third. When he first took over responsibility for the membership address lists, he resisted as long as he dared the called-for regular repeats of the elaborate geographical versions of those lists produced and published by his two immediate predecessors, in which members were listed under groups of the vice-counties in which they lived. He did eventually produce one other such list, but never another.

British Herbaria, "an index to the location of herbaria of British vascular plants with biographical references to their collectors", was the first of his purely reference works to appear in print. Embarked on in 1949, initially with A. J. Wilmott as intended co-author, it was published by the Society in 1958. It filled a long-felt gap in the literature, and its system of assigning each institution holding one or more collections a distinguishing set of letters, designed so as to complement those used in *Index Herbariorum* (whose compilers later acknowledged much assistance from Duggie), was promptly adopted for standard use in all the Society's publications. Together with its considerably larger replacement of 1984, *British and Irish Herbaria*, which was compiled jointly with D. E. Allen, this was more complicated than Duggie's other undertakings in

requiring much of the information to be collected by postal questionnaire and by the need to distinguish between a person's actual herbarium and the presence of merely some sheets of his or her collecting in another institution. Of necessity, too, both volumes were the fruit of a good deal of collaboration, but it is no secret that the bulk of the work was his in each case. At the time of the first survey many museums were disgracefully vague about what they possessed and who had collected their material. Between the two surveys that situation greatly improved and the mass of fresh information that consequently mounted up rendered the second edition inevitable.

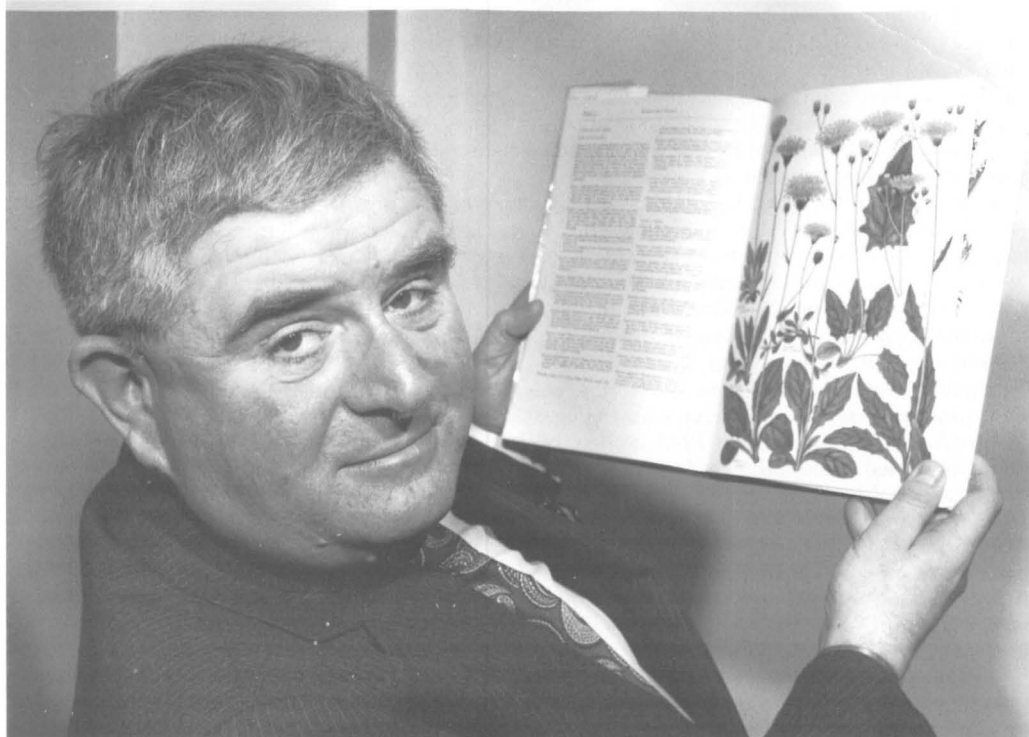
During the 1950s, while engaged on *British Herbaria*, Duggie simultaneously gave extensive assistance to the American botanist S. F. Blake in connection with the latter's second volume, covering Western Europe, of *Geographical Guide to Floras of the World*, published in 1961. Duggie's own *Index to Botanical Monographs* (1967) was similar in character, if much more narrowly focused: "a guide to monographs and taxonomic papers relating to phanerogams and vascular cryptogams found growing wild in the British Isles". Collected together in this are nearly 1,900 references from the year 1800 onwards.

All this time the great mountain of material he had built up on the vascular plants and bryophytes of Middlesex had been left in limbo, with no apparent prospect of ever achieving print. Friends at Kew now made its existence known to The Ray Society and as an avowedly historical Flora the work was at last made publicly available in 1975. Duggie later served on the Council of The Ray Society, from 1984 until his death. By that time a *Supplement* to the *Historical Flora*, compiled over twenty years with characteristic meticulous attention to detail, had gone to press. This was expected to be published by The Ray Society in early 2000.

A small flood of further books in which he had a greater or lesser hand then followed. *Docks and Knotweeds of the British Isles*, which he co-authored with Lousley as the third of the B.S.B.I. Handbooks, was the first to come, in 1981. This was originally to be a monograph by Lousley alone, but it was rescued by Duggie after Lousley died in 1976. Lousley, being well-known as an expert in *Rumex*, had largely written the (for him) more difficult accounts of all the other genera first, which left, somewhat perversely, the account of *Rumex* for Duggie to compile unaided. A second edition, being undertaken by J. R. Akeroyd, will benefit from copious notes left by Duggie for just such a publication.

In later life, especially after retirement in 1980, he had time at last to take on editing work in further directions. In 1976 the Richmond Publishing Company secured him as one of the six founding editors of its periodical *Natural History Book Reviews*, and in each of the first nine issues - before the publisher changed and the editorship was concentrated in one person only - up to five and once as many as nine pieces appeared over his name. He also clearly had a hand in enlisting just as many from botanical friends. Having been engaged by Ebury Press to vet the nomenclature of W. Keble Martin's *The Concise British Flora in Colour*, when that started out in 1965 on its astonishing climb on to the bestseller lists, Duggie was later engaged to revise the text for a revamped new edition in 1982, after the author's death. He was to remark ruefully that he would have profited greatly if he had accepted the offer of a percentage royalty rather than the lump sum for which he opted! Later, The Ray Society asked him to undertake the much more formidable task of preparing for the press the monograph by E. S. Edees and A. Newton, *Brambles of the British Isles*, a task which involved much painstaking checking of dates and references as well as two exceptionally arduous proof readings before the book's appearance in 1988.

As a fitting culmination, the *List of Vascular Plants of the British Isles* - immediately known to everyone as the "Kent List" - was produced for the Society and published by it in 1992 after seven years in preparation. By then it was over three decades since J. E. Dandy's analogous volume had appeared and numerous nomenclatural and taxonomic changes had accumulated, many new hybrids had been detected and a marked increase in the number of established aliens had occurred. The new list consequently extended to many more taxa than its predecessor. In one sense it was the stepchild of *BSBI Abstracts*, for through his work for that Duggie had kept abreast of the trickle of new names entering the literature and made a regular point of seeking authoritative advice on whether or not there was a strong enough case for accepting those for B.S.B.I. purposes. Compilation of the *List* proceeded in parallel to the preparation of *New Flora of the British Isles* (1991) by C. A. Stace, with whom consultations on an agreed common nomenclature and classification occupied hundreds of pages of correspondence and many days of convivial meetings over those seven years and thereafter up to his death. The "Kent List" is merely the tip of a very



Duggie Kent (1920–1998) with a copy of W. Keble Martin's *The concise British Flora in colour* (Photo. c. 1965, courtesy of North Thames Gas).

sizeable iceberg: characteristically, Duggie had compiled, as well as the places and dates of publication of all the taxa listed, many more synonyms than the strictly limited number included in the finished work. The product of an immense amount of meticulous library research, all this information is safely stored on the B.S.B.I. Database at the University of Leicester, where it is kept updated and is the object of many enquiries from researchers.

In these later years he also received further honours. In 1977 he was the recipient of the H. H. Bloomer Medal, which The Linnean Society of London awards each year to an amateur naturalist of particular distinction. His amateur status was in fact so well disguised by the prolific nature and consistently high standards of his works that distinguished foreign botanists often found it hard to believe. In 1979, after reputedly two unsuccessful attempts to persuade him to accept nomination as President, the B.S.B.I. was able to overcome his diffidence to the extent of his agreeing to let his name go forward for election as one of the Vice-Presidents. And finally in 1993, to the great pleasure of his many friends, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire and personally invested with that by Her Majesty The Queen.

This lengthy account of his botanical career must not be allowed to leave the impression that that was the limit of his interests. Indeed, if he himself was to be believed, botany was not even his principal one: it came a mere third, he liked to insist, to cats and Wagner, "in that order". With the burly frame and ruddy countenance that gave him the appearance of Farmer Giles the prime place he accorded to cats could not but seem incongruous, but he was undoubtedly heartbroken in his last year by the demise of his "dear friend and companion Smudger", following not long after the death of his beloved Ivy. Watching cricket (especially Middlesex) was another, lifelong passion. He took a connoisseur's delight, moreover, in forming collections of certain garden plants. He was a dedicated member of the British *Fuchsia* and International Asclepiad Societies and of the Geraniaceae Group, contributing to their journals, and he compiled a very extensive card-index of all the *Fuchsia* cultivars he managed to trace.

Some of the time and energy he was able to devote to this remarkable medley of interests was saved by not engaging in some activities that he might have been expected to pursue. He showed little or no interest in conservation, for example, and, disliking public speaking, rarely gave a lecture. His herbarium consisted of only about 2500 sheets, mostly from Middlesex in the 1940s and 1950s, and was scarcely added to in his last 35 years. Living close to his place of employment also meant he lost minimal leisure to commuting; being a non-driver, his travelling was by public transport or by being driven by his wife.

A good idea of the way Duggie operated can be gained by a study of his botanical notes, which were carefully listed by him in "Manuscript 24" and indexed in "Manuscript 25". There were four categories: notebooks, manuscripts, folders, and maps of Middlesex. His Notebooks, started in 1941 and ending in 1983, numbered 113 and contained a wide range of data. These included field notes (principally from Middlesex but also from his family holidays); notes on Middlesex taken from the literature, other botanists' manuscripts and herbaria; notes that were to become the nucleus of some of his papers (e.g. *Senecio squalidus* notes started in 1950, British herbaria in 1953 and *Veronica filiformis* in 1954); data supplementary to various papers (e.g. to *Handlist of Plants of the London Area*); references to deceased botanists; and the raw data collected for *BSBI Abstracts*. Interestingly, up to 1945 he mainly used English names for the plants he listed. One notebook included the full plant list that he made on his 1971 holiday to Scotland, starting at West Ealing and finishing in West Ross and Wick. The 24 Manuscripts included many relating to his *Historical Flora of Middlesex*, including (no. 1) "Flora of Middlesex" which was intriguingly "destroyed 6/7/1950"; a catalogue of his botanical library, including the cost of the books he bought and their origin if second-hand; a list of British natural history journals; and a cumulative list of the species he found within one mile of 75 Adelaide Road. Somewhat surprisingly, there were no lists of his own herbarium or publications, but here is the abundant evidence of an instinctive and methodical collector and collator.

One keen interest of Duggie that never came to fruition in his lifetime was his commitment to the system of vice-county recording. One will not find mention of grid squares in his Middlesex flora (or its Supplement), and we doubt that he ever spent much time 'square-bashing'. He had intended producing an updated 'Comital Flora' well before his paper proposing one at the 1961 B. S.B.I. conference: notebooks 42–45 (1951) listed common species for which v.c. records were required. As an example of lengths to which he would go to achieve his goals, and as a comment on days before ordinary people had much spare cash and before the days of photocopiers, in the 1940s he copied out by hand the entire first and second Supplements to Watson's *Topographical Botany* (1905 & 1929–30), amounting to 217 printed pages. Duggie later became one of the most active members of the Vice-county Census Catalogue Committee that was set up in 1988, and did the lion's share of the initial data-gathering. His efforts should see the light of day very early in the new millennium.

Duggie's final years were sadly blighted by ill health and by the death in 1988 of his only child and in March 1997 by that of his wife. As it turned out, he outlived her by only eighteen months. The B.S.B.I., The Natural History Museum and Kew were all officially represented at the funeral. His herbarium has been acquired by The Natural History Museum, while his botanical books and bound manuscripts have been purchased by Summerfield Books of Brough, Cumbria.

It is often said that no-one is irreplaceable, but also that exceptions prove the rule. Duggie was such an exception, one of the last of the great amateurs to devote most of their lives to the study of wild British plants and their literature, and there is sadly no-one in sight to rival his knowledge, expertise, long memory and dedication. A man of very definite views, he was well aware of his own limitations, and rather scornful of those who did not know theirs. Many have lost a loyal friend and colleague, the whole B.S.B.I. an unfailing servant; at least we can be thankful that so many of his contributions remain for all to admire and use. We shall not see his likes again.

This account would not be complete without extending our deepest sympathy to his two granddaughters, Shelley and Nicola, to whom we are indebted for some of the key dates and family information. Others who have made valuable contributions are Mary Briggs, Dick Brummitt, Rodney Burton, Arthur Chater, Joan and Peter Hall, Keith Hyatt, Ron Payne and Francis Rose.

D.E. ALLEN & C.A. STACE