

## Obituary

LARCH SYLVIA GARRAD  
(1936–2005)

With the death of Larch Garrad on 7 July 2005 the Society has lost its long-serving Recorder for Vice-county 71 and the Isle of Man, an authority of exceptional breadth on both its natural and local history.

An only child, born in 1936 Larch's closeness to her civil servant father ensured that from an early age she acquired both his voraciousness for reading and a keen interest in the details of the countryside, to the latter of which her enrolment in the Wild Flower Society gave a botanical slant. Brought up in Somerset, she attended the Grammar School for Girls in Weston-super-Mare before going on to Birmingham University to read Archaeology and Ancient History. One of her archaeology lecturers happened to hail from the Isle of Man and it was through working on a student excavation there under his direction that she came to be acquainted with the Island.

Meanwhile, excavation had taken her also to Greece, where the study of pottery styles appealed to her taxonomic bent and in due course became the subject of postgraduate research that culminated in the award of a doctorate. However, the career as an archaeologist that ought to have followed turned out to be elusive: posts in the subject were then still very few and fiercely competed for, and eventually she had to settle for one as a librarian in Gloucestershire, the great distance of which from the Isle of Man involved fearfully arduous and complicated journeys whenever she returned to see her parents, who were now living there in retirement.

Providentially, a vacancy arose not long afterwards on the staff of the Manx Museum in Douglas – though for someone to take special responsibility for natural history, not in archaeology (which was well covered already). However, small museums necessarily prize broad interests and versatility above deep knowledge in one special field and she was able to gain the job on the basis of her reasonable familiarity with the Island's natural history and its flora in particular.

By that time, the compiling of a much-needed book-length account of the Island's vascular plants had been under way for thirteen years, but one by one the few resident

contributors of records had been dropping away through death, incapacity or removal 'across', and intensive fieldwork had largely fallen to occasional irruptions by visiting botanists that were all too brief. The arrival of a resident one at last who brought to this project personal enthusiasm as well as professional commitment was thus providential. Within two years, what is more, Larch struck up a friendship at evening class with a local schoolteacher nearing retirement who fancied using her impending greater leisure to pursue a long-existing interest in plants with greater seriousness. Marjorie Devereau supplied not only an extra pair of eyes, but two exceptionally sharp ones, which were to produce a string of increasingly startling discoveries in the years that followed; her better sight also enabled her to master sections of the flora, most notably *Carex*, that were unavoidably barred to Larch. As a car-owner, moreover, she rescued the bus-dependent Larch from over-localised exploration. The innumerable additional records that arose from their joint efforts put paid to what had threatened to be indefinite deferment of the intended published volume, and the completion of that in 1984 owed an enormous amount to their cajoling and, ultimately, very full involvement in the editorial process.

As is often the way, the publication of the *Flora* had the paradoxical effect of lowering activity instead of sustaining or even increasing it. For lack of a concrete objective of comparable scope in its place the previous torrent of records fell off to a trickle, and competing interests filled the resulting vacuum. In Larch's case there had long been no shortage of those and to collecting and recording non-marine molluscs and woodlice for the respective national atlases of those groups she has soon added investigating the uses of local plants as folk cures, establishing the identity of subfossil bones yielded by past excavations, co-authoring a book on the Island's industrial archaeology, and another on British holiday souvenirs. Conservation concern having meanwhile spread to the Island very belatedly, the establishment of nature trails and promoting the work of a local wildlife trust made additional calls on her energies.

These multifarious involvements and the wide perspective they imparted made Larch the obvious person to contribute the relevant volume in the 'Regional Naturalist' series instituted by that transient shooting star of the British publishing scene, David & Charles. Once *The Naturalist in the Isle of Man* was off her hands, in 1972, they were busy again with an intended similar book on the Canary Islands, after a captivating holiday soaking herself in the natural history of those in turn. Unfortunately, though, that one had to be abandoned when the publisher ran into financial difficulties and had to cancel the contract. At the same time it was a symptom of widening horizons: concentrating so exclusively on one comparatively small island had begun to feel too restricting. Attendance at B.S.B.I. field meetings elsewhere, including on the Continent, had given her an appetite for other and richer floras. The limited prospects for professional advancement in so small and static a community, moreover, were meanwhile leading her to give thought to strengthening her qualifications and thus her geographical options. To that end, halfway through her career, she registered on an Open University course in botany. An early by-product of that was an impressive biometric analysis of a relic oak population on the Island's cliffs.

In later years the onset of heart trouble made solitary fieldwork medically inadvisable. Friends who relished the wonderful volleys of sometimes hilariously ill-assorted items of information for which she was well-known – and which found equal expression in her letters – were more than happy to have such an outstandingly well-informed guide on drives around the Island, but Larch was greatly restricted thenceforward in what she could accomplish. In her capacity as B.S.B.I. Recorder she had diligently put together the

relevant local data for the Society's Rare Species Survey, but she regretfully had to recognise that it had become physically beyond her to fulfil the recording requirements of the *New Atlas*. What she was able to supply on the other hand, was an exceptionally full set of records for the alien species, as she had for some years been concentrating on those with a view to publishing a supplement to the 1984 *Flora*. The unusually numerous exotics that flourish in the Island's mild climate, traditionally disdained by recorders of the wild flora, had particularly engaged the attention of Marjorie Devereau and herself on their each acquiring gardens of their own and turning into enthusiastic plantswomen. From marrying archaeology came in 1985 *A History of Manx Gardens and Gardening...*, a publication on that then surprisingly almost virgin subject that was so well-received than an enlarged edition was called for in 2003. The discovery in the meantime near Peel of a remarkable assemblage of unusual adventives fired her to study those intensively as well, the preliminary results appearing in the Island's principal natural history journal two years later. At the time of her death she was preparing for publication a full-scale Alien Flora of the Island, and hopefully that will have reached a sufficiently advanced state for that intention to be realised.

Larch's irrepressible vivacity, the product of a quick and very sharp mind, will be widely missed. Thankfully, a great part of the very extensive and remarkable diverse body of knowledge that she built up over rather more than forty ceaselessly active and copiously productive years, has been committed to print. The invaluable co-ordinating role that she performed in the field of Manx Studies will nevertheless be very difficult to replace.

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