

Franklyn Perring Obituary

Influential mapper of Britain's plants and wildlife



Philip Oswald – *THE GUARDIAN*

Wed 5 Nov 2003

Franklyn Perring, who has died of cancer at the age of 76, was one of the most influential botanists and nature conservationists of the 20th century.

He is best known as joint editor, with Dr Max Walters, of the *Atlas Of The British Flora*, published for the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) in 1962. In preparing this, Perring recruited 1,500 volunteer botanists - both amateur and professional - to map the occurrence of nearly 1,700 species of flowering plants and ferns. The project set the pattern for recording schemes for other biological groups and later computer-aided atlases, including *The Millennium Atlas Of Butterflies In Britain And Ireland* (2001) and the massive *New Atlas Of The British And Irish Flora* (2002).

Born in Forest Gate, east London, Perring grew up at Woodford Green, on the edge of Epping Forest, and at a weekend cottage on the Blackwater estuary, where, encouraged by an uncle, he began his lifelong interest in natural history, climbing ancient trees, catching crabs, roach and perch, and collecting wild flowers and frogspawn.

At the start of the second world war, he went as a boarder to Earls Colne grammar school, Essex, where he was further inspired by his biology master, CJ

Sims. After army national service in Ireland, India and Malaya, he read natural sciences at Queens' College, Cambridge, staying on to study for a PhD in the ecology and biogeography of chalk grassland plants. It was here that he began his lifelong friendship with Walters, then curator of the university herbarium.

In April 1954, the BSBI appointed Walters as part-time director of its mapping scheme and, at his invitation, Perring became senior worker the following October. Aiming to map the presence of plant species in about 3,500 10x10 kilometre grid squares over a period of five years, he designed regional record cards, led "square-bashing" parties to under-recorded parts of Britain, helped Professor David Webb in his almost singlehanded attempt to cover the republic of Ireland, managed the input of data to punched cards, and supervised the then novel use of a tabulator to print maps mechanically from them.

In 1959, Perring became the scheme's director, and, in 1964, moved to the Nature Conservancy's Monks Wood experimental station, near Huntingdon, as head of the new biological records centre (BRC). Here, as well as launching many other recording schemes, he was responsible for compiling, with his colleague Lynne Farrell, another groundbreaking publication, the first British red data book, listing threatened species, *Vascular Plants* (1977).

From 1979 until his retirement in 1987, Perring was general secretary of the Royal Society for Nature [Conservation](#), the umbrella body for local naturalists' trusts. During this period, *Natural World* magazine was started for all trust members, £15m was raised for wildlife projects, some 500 nature reserves were established and urban wildlife groups were founded. He was made an OBE in 1988.

Perring made no real distinction between botany as his profession and as a spare-time passion, whether in fieldwork or when lecturing, teaching and writing. As botanical secretary of the Linnean Society of London, from 1973 to 1978, he helped to run several successful conferences, but his greatest contribution was to the BSBI, of which he was president from 1993 to 1995.

Latterly, he led a BSBI initiative to educate teenagers and young graduates in the joys of field botany, and ran courses on plant identification for the field studies council and others. Also in his retirement, he set up and chaired Wildlife Travel, a company offering expert-led overseas holidays and donating its profits to the trusts.

Frank was irrepressibly exuberant, with an infectious enthusiasm and a seemingly inexhaustible fund of ideas (as well as puns, some brilliant, some

execrable). He was determined, sometimes blinkered or naively unrealistic, and impatient with bureaucracy. He was not so much intolerant of opposition as incredulous that it could exist; criticism rolled off him, and he never bore a grudge.

He was knowledgeable about chamber music (especially Schubert), opera, theatre and literature, and was a member of a local poetry-reading group. Other passions included West Ham, rugby, horseracing (but not betting) and bell-ringing. Until recently, he was secretary to the parochial church council of St Rumbald's, Stoke Doyle, close to his home on the edge of Oundle, where he was instrumental in changing the management of the churchyard so that it is now a flowery meadow.

He is survived by his wife Margaret and their daughter Emma, and by Neil, the son of his previous marriage to the late Yvonne Matthews.

Franklyn Hugh Perring, botanist, nature conservationist and author, born August 1 1927; died October 11 2003