

My years as County Recorder

H. J. Killick

Summary

The author describes some of the highlights of his tenure of the post of vice-county recorder of Oxfordshire.

Introduction

I became a botanist in 1945, joined the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI; now the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland) in 1948 and obtained a degree in Natural Sciences at Cambridge, specializing in botany, in 1955. In Hertfordshire I began to record plants systematically in the squares within the National Grid; clusters of four 2 x 2 km squares became known as tetrads.

When I came to Oxfordshire in 1978 I started recording tetrads for a proposed Flora of Oxfordshire, and two years later one of the organizers, Stan Woodell, invited me to take over his role as BSBI's County Recorder. This covered what BSBI termed vice-county 23, and is approximately the pre-1974 Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire (OXF) lies to the north of Berkshire (BRK), a large part of the border between the two counties for many years being the river Thames. Early in the 20th century, Caversham (previously in Oxfordshire) became part of Berkshire. In 1974 the Boundaries Commission assigned a number of parishes in the 'leg' part of the 'Berkshire boot' to Oxfordshire. This area included the Vale of the White Horse and parishes around Abingdon, including those bordering on the city of Oxford itself.

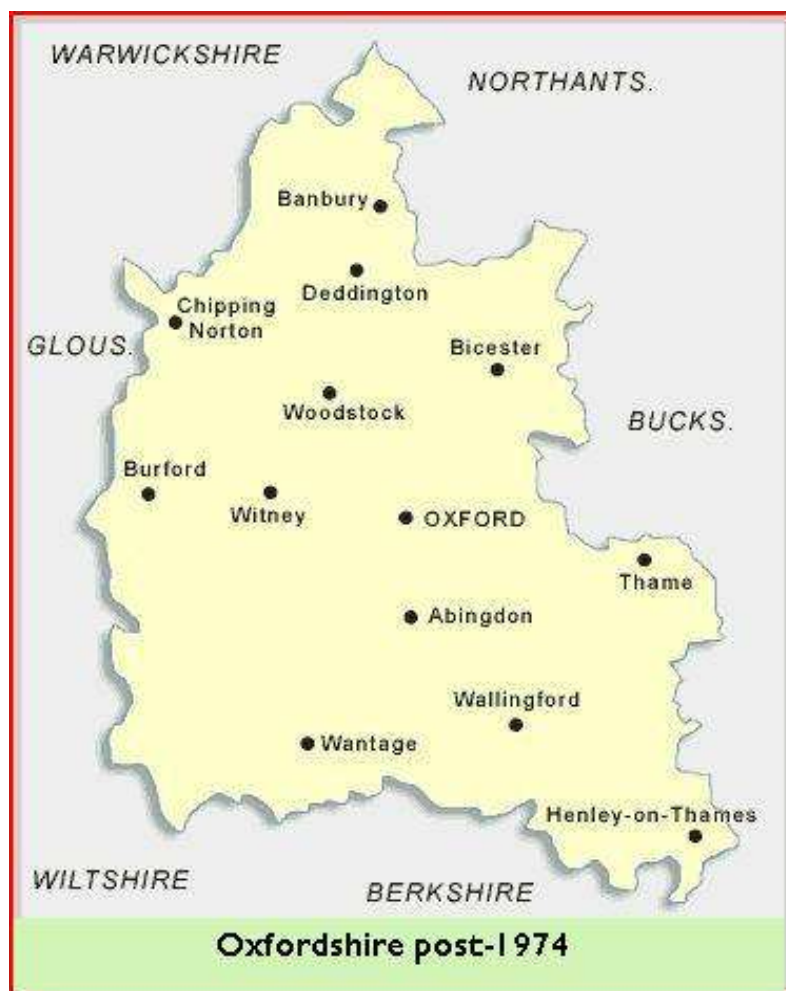


Figure 1. Oxfordshire

The County Recorder's Job

The job was then not onerous then and didn't, and still doesn't, imply the writing of a County Flora. It was to receive and keep records from botanists (often on pink cards; many good ones from Humphry Bowen), the Biological Records Centre and elsewhere; many of the latter related to rarities or threatened species, notably Summer Snowflake, *Leucojum aestivum*.



Figure 2. *Leucojum aestivum*, Summer Snowflake, and its distribution map (from BSBI website)

It also included sending in relevant records to the Biological Records Centre, (BRC), and in particular new vc23 records to the BSBI's journal *Watsonia*, later the *New Journal of Botany*. In the 1980s, I could not do this in the absence of information as to what species were in fact new, but I could update this in Killick *et al.* 1998 as "First record this survey", and add new ones subsequently.

My first onerous (and exciting) job was to be a local organizer for the BSBI's Monitoring Scheme of 1987-8. This was a nationwide project designed to cover a sample of the entire British flora. Every 10 x 10 km square in Britain can be divided into 25 tetrads defined by the grid reference of their SW corner and labelled by letter; of these, three – the A, J and W tetrads - were chosen for detailed recording. For vice-county 23 I assembled a team of 18, which proved straightforward as some were already recording for the Flora.

I reported the project in *The Abingdon Herald* as "Big Bang Year for Botanists" (it had followed the "big bang" in the stock exchange) and explored one tetrad on 1 January 1987. Many records came in steadily from all the required tetrads in our area; these were easier for me to collate when a recorder's separate visits were recorded on one sheet rather than a separate sheet per visit. I did of course receive some records I was uneasy about, though I don't remember the species. Fortunately, when I suggested to their recorders that he/she was the only person who had claimed them,

they gracefully withdrew them. The resulting print-outs from the Biological Records Centre were massive and I had to check them.

In 1990 in one of my visits to Plant Sciences Department in the South Parks Road, I chatted with Fred Topliffe, a senior technician who had worked hard to assemble the Flora data on behalf of Stan Woodell. I saw a set of records on master cards. They were not yet being used to write a Flora so I suggested that this would be a good activity for my retirement and was accepted as a co-editor by Stan and by Roy Perry, then at Cardiff. This led to Killick *et al.* 1998.



Figure 3. The Flora of Oxfordshire published in 1998 (Photo reproduced with permission from Pisces Publications)

The county recorder's big job in the 1990s was assembling vc23's records in three date classes for "Atlas 2000" which was published as Preston *et al.* 2002. The pre-1970 and 1970-87 records came easily from Killick *et al.* 1998 but the more recent ones again involved much new recording by me and encouraging local helpers. Writing 80 captions for the Atlas was fun but not a "must" for county recorders. I did also help Clive Stace compile a vice-county list, which added some afterthoughts to Killick *et al.* 1998.

In 2003-4 the BSBI organized a repeat of the Monitoring Scheme of 1977-8, with a view to assessing the changes in the same A, J and W tetrads after the intervening 16 years. The exercise was titled "Local Change". I found it a bit harder to recruit recorders but we had enough. We now had better Floras with which to identify aliens. Again, I had other people's records and the resulting print-outs to check. We had more computer-literate people though I was myself never happy with Biobase and Mapmate.

I was routinely sending in new records¹ but in other respects my role in my last few years ceased to be satisfactory; with the BSBI finding more jobs for recorders and my

¹ Ellen Lee, Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, reported that they had received 9157 records from John Killick plus another 1077 records from his work on the Rare Plant Register, giving a total of 10,234 records in all.

becoming a full time carer. I didn't, for example, contribute much to the Threatened Plants Project. It was better for the BSBI when Sue Helm and then David Morris took over as county recorder for vc 23.

Particularly in the later years I felt under pressure from the jobs needing doing, but it was good to feel respected for taking on the job. My recent title "Emeritus"² adds to this. I should add that there is one "perk" for county recorders. I have lost count of the number of Recorders' Conferences I attended in September in nice places like Lancaster and Shrewsbury, with talks, excursions and like-minded people.

Postscript

Despite standing down as County Recorder John remains active in the field as shown in the pictures below and is currently working with colleagues towards a further publication entitled *Threatened Plants of Oxfordshire* (editor).



Figure 4. Enjoying a Field outing with the Abingdon Naturalists in 2008 and leading a Fungus Foray in 2017 (Photos courtesy of Michael Bloom)

References

Killick, J., Perry R. and Woodell, S. 1998. The Flora of Oxfordshire. Pisces Publications.

Preston, C.D., Pearman D.A., Dines T.D. 2002 New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora. Oxford University Press.

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² Peter Stroh, BSBI Scientific Officer, reported that Emeritus Recorders are BSBI Vice-County Recorders who have made a substantial contribution to the Society, defined as:

- A minimum of 10 years as a vice-county recorder, but now retired from that post.
- Provision of a substantial number of quality records (i.e. not just 10 km squares, but records at finer precision from 2 km down to 100 m) to any successor and the BSBI itself.

There are currently 27 Emeritus Recorders, so John is a member of an elite group.