

Photo Rob Barrett

J. H. BARRETT, MBE, MA, MSC
1913-1999

A Vice President of the Field Studies Council
formerly
Warden of Dale Fort Field Centre 1947 - 1967
Director of The Pembrokeshire Countryside Unit 1968 - 1978
Editor of *Field Studies* 1971 - 1977

JOHN BARRETT, familiarly known as JB, enriched many people's lives in his full and varied lifetime. Readers of this journal will link the name to Dale Fort Field Centre and Skokholm Bird Observatory or to that epoch-making book *Collins Pocket Guide to the Seashore* (Barrett & Yonge, 1958). For others, the association will have been with the Church in Wales, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, the Pembrokeshire Countryside Unit, HM Coast Guard, the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales, the National Museum of Wales, various committees of The National Trust, Dale Parish Council or Dale Parochial Church Council. For yet others, it was Dale Yacht Club and a GP 14 dinghy called *Dingy Skipper*.

JB was born in King's Lynn, Norfolk, on 21st July 1913 and educated at Repton and St John's College, Cambridge, where he read Economics and Geography. He graduated in 1935 with no particular career in mind - provided it did not involve economics. Visiting the University Appointments Board, he was asked if he had ever considered looking after

elephants in the jungles of Upper Burma. He hadn't, but that is what he set off to do - working as an Assistant Forest Manager for the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation under the aegis of "Elephant Bill" (J. H. Williams). He rapidly acquired a knowledge of elephants but, unfortunately, cerebral malaria as well, and was invalided home early in 1936.

The University Appointments Board next recommended him to apply for a regular commission in the Royal Air Force. ["There's a war coming and those who are properly trained will have a better chance of surviving it".] The RAF never asked him about the malaria, so he never told them! By the time he was shot down over Schleswig Holstein in September 1941, he was a Squadron Leader. A promising service career as a bomber pilot was abruptly curtailed and he spent the rest of the war in a series of prisoner-of-war camps - Oflag VIB (Warburg), Oflag XXI (Schubin), Stalag Luft III (Sagan) [where he was part of the support team for the 'Wooden Horse' escape] and, after the winter march across eastern Europe, Stalag IIIa (Luckenwalde).

It was whilst he was at Oflag VIB that his serious bird watching began. The chance of war had thrown him together with John Buxton, who knew the island of Skokholm well, George Waterston, who was later to revive ornithology on Fair Isle, and Peter Condor who would one day direct the RSPB. These four recorded migration patterns and the minutiae of tree sparrow and chaffinch nesting behaviour. Birds gave a purpose to dreary days and, doubtless, JB's enthusiasm will have influenced others. Who else could have persuaded a German security guard to obtain for him all three volumes of Niethammer's *Deutsche Vogelkunde*?

Wing Commander Barrett was eventually released by the Russians and repatriated but a career in the peace-time RAF no longer appealed. The dreadful shadow of the Air Ministry corridors loomed and JB determined to resign, once he could find an income to support family life. His choice of a post-war career was a direct consequence of that POW experience. He knew full well how his (then) limited knowledge of natural history had lightened the wartime darkness, and was determined to discharge the debt by helping others develop an interest in the world around them.

He became, in 1947, the first Warden of Dale Fort Field Centre^{*}, overlooking Milford Haven at the extreme south-western tip of Wales. It was one of the four pioneering Field Centres established by the infant Council for the Promotion of Field Studies (later to become the Field Studies Council), see Barrett (1987a). Almost single-handed, he had to convert an empty building amid the post-war shortages (this involved collecting driftwood for nails and raiding abandoned military establishments for electrical wire), service the Bird Observatory on the nearby island of Skokholm, research his local environment and then devise and develop appropriate field teaching techniques to convey the hard-won information in an interesting and stimulating manner. In particular, he had to develop ways and means for identifying seashore animals and plants, for there were no books written for the layman. It is said that he set himself to learn three new species every day.

At the same time, he had to make the Field Centre pay its way. Money was in very short supply: university groups came in the Easter and long vacations, and amateur naturalists visited in summer but there were too many empty periods. The financial crisis associated

* He was actually appointed Assistant Warden of Flatford Mill Field Centre but, before he and the family could move to East Bergholt, Dale Fort came up. The Executive must have had doubts about his academic credentials for they initially made him Acting Assistant Warden, but without appointing a Warden for him to act for or assist! He was promoted in 1948.



FIG. 2.

JB (third from the right) with the other FSC Senior staff on a Staff Conference outing. *from the left*, John Sankey (Juniper Hall), Charles Sinker (Preston Montford), Ian Mercer (Slapton Ley), Jim Bingley (Flatford Mill), John Barrett (Dale Fort), Paul Holmes (Malham Tarn) and Geoffrey Hutchings, Senior Tutor in Geography (the original Warden of Juniper Hall)

with the Korean War nearly sank the infant FSC. The 1952 season appeared a forlorn hope; the four Wardens accepted a 50% cut in salary.

It is a matter of historical fact that the determination of JB and his colleagues was rewarded. They developed courses appropriate for students taking A-level Biology or Geography, and appointed teaching staff to run them. Money came in. Dale Fort developed an international reputation for teaching marine biology and as a model for the way a Field Centre should be run, whilst Skokholm became an important centre for research on the house mouse (Dr R. J. "Sam" Berry) and sea birds (Dr Chris. Perrins and the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford) as well as being a Mecca for amateur birdwatchers.

JB was an inspiring teacher, full of anecdotes, and with a spectacular breadth of knowledge. Lacking formal scientific training, he was never constrained by the artificial divisions of Botany, Zoology, Geology, Geomorphology, Meteorology etc. etc. He claimed never to have read an A-level syllabus, but developed his own to cover the essentials of the Pembrokeshire coast environment. There were a lot of very satisfied customers and his influence on the young Assistant Wardens and Field Assistants who worked with him, was profound.

His war-time experiences gave him very different standards regarding acceptable levels of comfort ["A man is but a fool to complain of being cold in bed with his clothes on the chair beside him"] and student safety than are current today. Students, staff (and dogs) who did not keep up with his walking pace were simply left behind. On my inaugural walk around the Dale Peninsula, the standard first day of any course, we started with 30 students (and a dog) and returned with 2 students (and no dog). To give themselves a chance, some student

groups used to start down the Fort Road before JB and, on at least one occasion, he had a pleasant day on the beach all by himself because the students had gone somewhere else!

At Dale Fort, staff and visitors alike were encouraged to develop research projects in the local area, and to publish the results. Initially, they appeared in the FSC Annual Report but, later, in this journal which was established in 1959 for that very purpose and in which he took a special interest. It is notable that 40% of the papers in the first two volumes of *Field Studies* were sponsored by Dale Fort. In those days, authors submitted papers via one of the Wardens - not directly to the editor - and the challenge was to get your manuscript passed by JB. I well remember him editing out unnecessary verbiage from a manuscript, claiming to have cut the length by a third without deleting a single fact! He wasn't much less ruthless with my early papers on the shore crab - and they were greatly improved as a result.

A combination of demands from schools for courses more closely exam-oriented, with an inevitably restricted view of the natural world, and a new challenge to spread the environmental message to 'the plain man', caused JB to leave the Fort (but not Dale village or the FSC) in 1968 to establish the Pembrokeshire Countryside Unit in Broad Haven. He ran enormously popular guided walks along the coastal footpath, sharing his delight in the countryside with anyone and everyone who would join him. The whole guided walks industry that permeates countryside interpretation these days is derived from JB's initiative. Sadly, the Countryside Unit was closed down at the re-organisation of Local Government, when Pembrokeshire was subsumed by Dyfed, but the walks continued. The photograph on p. 549 was taken on Pickleridge (Dale) during the last walk he took; clearly he was enjoying it. As his list of publications shows, he never lost his interest in natural history or in sharing that interest with others.

This work with a wider public was augmented by regular contributions on BBC radio and television. Perhaps best remembered are the listeners' questions sessions with Derek Jones in the *Living World* or *Wildlife* series. Less well-known was his disgust when the BBC refused to televise the mouth parts of a crab because they would be too terrifying!

Having had to teach himself seashore identification (with the oft-acknowledged assistance of experts visiting the Fort, especially Professor Dick Purchon and Mr Bassindale), he was exactly the right person to collaborate with Professor Maurice Yonge to produce the first 'Field Guide' to invertebrate animals and non-flowering plants. *Collins Pocket Guide to the Seashore* remained in print from 1958 to 1996 and is still very useful. Meaningless jargon was ruthlessly eliminated but scientific precision maintained. Its influence would be hard to exaggerate, both on the people who used it (one boy was heard to remark "Sir, this animal is wrong!") and on a generation of authors / publishers who have sought to emulate it.

Following retirement, he devoted more time to the National Trust and to the Church in Wales for he served on numerous committees, local and national; countryside and ecclesiastical. He received an honorary MSc from the University of Wales, an MBE for services to conservation, the 1989 National Park Award and the 1996 H. H. Bloomer award from the Linnean Society of London for services to biology by an amateur biologist.

In 1940, he married Ruth Byass, who supported him loyally in all his activities; they were still dinghy racing competitively in their fifties! They have a daughter and three sons and, at the last count, 10 grandchildren and 9 great grandchildren.

Some 150 people attended a memorial service in Dale Church to give thanks for the life of John Barrett on July 22nd 1999. Afterwards, most gathered in Dale Fort to pay personal tributes and swap stories. People had come from far and wide to share their memories and

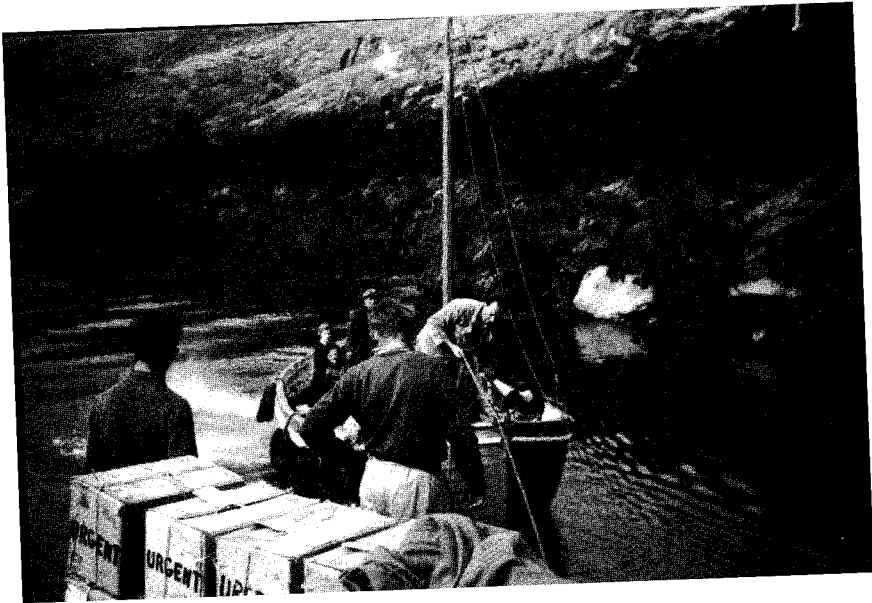


FIG. 3.

JB in the bows of the Dale Fort boat, *Cubango*, approaching the Skokholm landing jetty in June 1953. The boxes marked 'urgent' each contain two Manx shearwaters en route to Cambridge where G. V. T. Matthews would release them from the University Library tower to test their homing abilities from an unusual direction. JB hit an unexpected snag when he tried to send the boxes by train. "Shearwater" was not an animal on British Rail's list of acceptable livestock. "Donkey" was, so he sent the boxes as "donkeys" and everyone was happy - except the shearwaters - but they were back in their burrows on Skokholm before the message dating their release reached the Fort. This photograph appeared in *The Island Naturalist*, 37, Spring 1999 and is reproduced here by permission of the editor, David Saunders.

Photo by Evelyn Quiggin

all were impressed by the level of respect and admiration he had engendered in so many different groups of people.

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