

British Ornithologists' Union's 'Union Medal'

At the Union's Annual Conference in March, recently retired BOU Administrative Secretary, Gwen Bonham, was awarded the BOU's Union Medal for her outstanding contribution to the Union.

Born 22 November 1943 in Tring, Hertfordshire, Gwen was the youngest daughter of Mr and Mrs Wilkins, an established county farming family. She attended Ashlyns Grammar School, Berkhamsted, where she displayed a firm dislike for formal teaching, thinking Latin and science in particular would have no place in a secretarial job. She left school at age 16 with two GCE O-levels.

After working in a small local engineering company, in April 1964 Gwen joined the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) soon after it moved from Oxford to Tring, and worked at Beech Grove, just a few hundred yards from her parents' small-holding. A general love of the countryside and an appreciation of natural history was awakened by working alongside such colleagues as Ken Williamson, Bob Spencer and Chris Mead. The family atmosphere of Beech Grove, where everyone was treated equally, proved the start of many long friendships. Gwen fondly recalls her early BTO days at Beech Grove, when everyone emptied their own wastebins, burned rubbish in the garden and worked in spartan conditions. These were improved by members' working parties, organized by Susan Cowdy, during the 1960s.

At the BTO, Gwen's secretarial and organizational skills soon came to the fore. Map drawing and typing copious manuscripts for Ken Williamson (eventually learning to decipher his handwriting), and assisting the Populations Section staff, led to her taking minutes and servicing many BTO committees, including the Scientific Advisory Committee and The Atlas Working Group. Gwen led the support team for the BTO's Population Section, helping to grid Common Birds Census (CBC) plots, and quickly gained a good basic understanding of birds, and a growing interest in garden birds.

In 1965 Gwen handled the administrative side of the first Common Birds Census Conference held at Pendley Manor, Tring (where she had played as a child). She assisted with the first BTO annual conference at Swanwick, Derbyshire, in 1965, taking over its organization in

1970. As the BTO annual members' weekend grew, she turned her hand to organizing the February conferences (also at Swanwick). Gwen ensured that a warm smile greeted the many hundreds of conference-goers over the years, a smile that masked a stomach-churning interior, concerned that all would go well – it invariably did.

Gwen travelled countrywide with BTO staff to regional meetings, taking displays and manning the ever-popular BTO shop, and enjoying the hospitality of many BTO

members. In June 1973 she became Membership Secretary, a position in which she revelled, receiving the warm appreciation of staff and members. Typical of Gwen, she assembled a merry band of helpers from family and friends to gather at weekends at Beech Grove to stuff envelopes with *BTO News* and *Bird Study*. She forged close relationships with both the local printer and the post office, which helped to get the mailings out as cheaply and efficiently as possible.

Gwen is interested in all sports, especially football – she helped with the catering and social side of Tring Town Football Club for many years. She played badminton, and has a deep love of cricket, resulting in her being appointed scorer for the BTO cricket team (and those grudge matches against the RSPB for the 'Ashes'). She was always involved in BTO social activities in order to maintain the special 'family' atmosphere she so

enjoyed in her early days.

In 1987, when it was becoming obvious that the BTO had outgrown Beech Grove, and the BTO searched for a new home, Gwen decided to take a well-earned break; but this was not to be for long. Within a year, Gwen was 'head-hunted' by the British Ornithologists' Union, and offered the position of Administrative Secretary. She declined, as she did not want to travel to London, where the Union Office was then based at the Zoological Society offices. In order to secure Gwen's services, the BOU thought that if Gwen wouldn't move to them, they would move to her. So it was that the then BOU President, David Snow, secured an office for the BOU at the Natural History Museums' Bird Group offices at The Rothschild Museum, Tring, where she started work for the Union in November 1987. Her first task, faced with a bare office and umpteen packing cases stuffed with papers, was to organize the

Gwen Bonham



BOU's new HQ. The BOU was a whole new experience. Working largely on her own, Gwen soon set about breathing fresh life into the administration of the BOU and into the Union as a whole.

When Gwen arrived at the BOU, there had been no formal Union conferences for some time. But that was soon to change. It was due to Gwen's amazing ability to organize and galvanize, helped by the new Chairman of the BOU Meetings Committee, Chris Feare, that Gwen's first BOU conference on 'Gulls and Terns' miraculously took place in Liverpool in the autumn of 1988. This was despite the fact that the hotel booked for the event (not by Gwen) was run by an alcoholic and inhabited by his friends, so that many delegates were kept awake all night by their activities. However, the conference was a great success and established a firm foundation for a string of highly successful, entertaining and hugely enjoyable BOU conferences organized by Gwen over the coming years.

Whatever the adversity, nothing took Gwen away from her conference desk for long. Even after spending the night in an Aberdeen hospital following a car accident in which the car rolled several times, having her handbag stolen in Norwich, or caring for a delegate who had suffered a heart attack in Liverpool, Gwen continued unfazed; she has seen and done it all in the line of duty. Indeed, Gwen could cope with any demand thrown at her by conference delegates – emergency repairs to both people and clothes, complaints about food, rooms, the standard of lectures or the weather – all were greeted with her cheerful smile and usual willingness to help. She also has a knack of selecting reliable helpers – in particular her sister Stephanie Wells and her partner Iain Bishop – to help out at conferences, much to the BOU's benefit. Conferences were usually the place where most people got to see Gwen, so it was fortunate that she was able simultaneously to talk to one person, book in another and give yet another a cup of coffee, without missing a beat and always with her wonderful smile.

The British Birdwatching Fair was launched in 1988 and Gwen has represented the BOU at every one since. She oversaw the despatch of all sales goods from the BOU Office, including the expanding BOU Checklist series. She attended, serviced and minuted all BOU Council and Committee meetings, and as one would expect with any membership organization, running the membership side of the Union was a major function of the job. Because of the worldwide spread of the BOU membership, and the affection with which the Union's members hold her, Gwen must surely be the most well-known 'non-ornithologist' within the ornithological community.

Gwen is staunchly proud of the BOU, serving five Presidents – David Snow, Janet Kear, John Croxall, Ian Newton

and Chris Perrins – tirelessly and with great industry, tact, diplomacy and good humour, and always with the interests and reputation of the BOU at heart. She always seemed to understand what members of Council, or those on the various committees, were trying to say, even if no one else did, and made everybody sound suitably wise in her impeccable minutes. She was incredibly efficient in coping with the multitude of demands involved in running the BOU and the myriad of tasks that were asked of her.

Gwen has truly been the hub of the Union's work, and she facilitated and undertook a substantial revolution in the conduct of the Union's affairs – almost from quill pen to computer. By the mid-1990s, the workload of the BOU Office had increased by several orders of magnitude, and looking to 'wind down' Gwen attempted to take early retirement. Council, knowing only too well her worth to the Union, was quick to appoint a new staff member on a full-time basis in order to relieve Gwen of much of the responsibility of the day-to-day running of the Union. In 1997 Steve Dudley was appointed as the Union's Administrator, but this only served to increase work for them both, so there was still no let up for the seemingly tireless Gwen. Steve's arrival did, however, take the pressure of responsibility from her shoulders and provided her with a daily work colleague with whom she clicked immediately, helping to renew her appetite for BOU activities and thankfully prolonging her stay at the Union by a further six years.

Throughout her career, Gwen has always kept things afloat with considerable aplomb and, in so doing, is thought of with deep affection by those in ornithology all around the world. Both the BTO and the BOU can count themselves lucky that they had such an energetic, engaging, hard-working, happy and fun person at the hub of their administration during challenging development phases of both organizations.

On her 60th birthday in 2003, Gwen retired from the BOU, having served the ornithological community so diligently for 40 years. She retired to the idyllic country setting of Eydon, in Northamptonshire, to the home she and Iain had moved to two years previously following Iain's retirement, and in preparation for her eventual retirement. Within this short time, this new environment has fuelled further her love of her garden, natural history and the local history of her new home.

Her act is impossible to follow, and we will miss her greatly, but hope that we will still continue to see her as much as possible. Gwen has always insisted that she knows nothing about birds, a ludicrous and typically modest statement given her quiet enjoyment of one of the best bird tables in the business, just outside her living room window. We hope she can now have the time with Iain to enjoy it to the full.