

Remembering Roger Banks

This is an obituary by Roger's daughter, Thomasina Findlay. It is appearing in the *OE magazine*, an annual publication for former Epsom College pupils. Roger attended the school in Surrey between 1942 and 1947.

Roger Banks

Born: April 18, 1929.

Died: February 4, 2008.

Roger Banks, botanical artist and author, Antarctic weatherman, fossil hunter, Himalayan trekker, and Crail harbour-master emeritus died on February 4, 2008.

Born in London in 1929, he was educated at Epsom and then went up to St Andrews University in Scotland. When the opportunity of an expedition to the South Atlantic (as part of the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey) presented itself to him in 1952, he seized it with enthusiasm and abandoned academia. It was a decision which was to occupy the next three years and influence the rest of his life. His book *The Unrelenting Ice* (1962) tells that remarkable story. Much of Roger's skill as a botanical artist was honed in this time. He often remarked: "If you are heavy-handed painting an iceberg it looks like a flint, and if you can paint sunset over glaciers you find the



Nature's friend: Roger last summer

petaled complexity of a rose poses the same technical problems."

He claimed that it was when lashed to his bunk in a storm, doing running repairs with needle and thread, that he learnt the essentials of gros-point tapestry. Roger was an ecologist long before the word was invented, let alone fashionable. He believed passionately in the balance of nature and hated waste of any kind – anyone who has ever experienced his wonderful experimental cooking will

appreciate that. He had a genuine love for the planet and all who inhabited it, and was latterly much exercised by the threat of global warming.

His love of nature was reflected particularly in his botanical watercolours. He was taught the art by Mary Grierson in Kew and it was to become his great enthusiasm as well as his bread and butter for much of his adult life. His work is in the collections of the Queen Mother, Queen Margrethe of Denmark and in the Botanical Library of the British Museum. What he self-deprecatingly called his 'weed-garden' at Dalgairn, the house he shared with his wife Jane, was the source of many of his wild-flower pictures. But these were never just sterile recordings of genus and species, but delightful flights of fancy, often incorporating roses and honeysuckle lovingly intertwined, with an obligingly attendant bumble-bee.

He produced two significant books on wild-flowers, *Living in a wild garden* (1980) and *Old Cottage Garden Flowers* (1983), as well as illustrations for the National Trust, the National Trust for Scotland and several wildlife charities. For some years he wrote a weekly gardening column for *Scotland on Sunday*.

After Jane's death in 1996 he made several visits to Nepal documenting the flora and fauna, and produced numerous drawings and paintings to record his experiences. He loved the simplicity of life there. It was in perfect harmony with his notions of thrift and frugality. He was, nevertheless, the most generous of hosts and loved entertaining not only his enormous circle of friends, but visitors of all kinds hailed from the porch of Lobster Cottage and invited in to try the dish of the day.

■ You can also read a tribute to Roger in *The Herald*: http://www.theherald.co.uk/features/obituaries/display.var.2069264.0.roger_banks.php

Epsom's other species, recalled by Roger

■ A couple of years ago, Roger wrote to the *OE magazine* about the plants and creatures he remembered from his schooldays, writes the Editor. We had planned to meet up to do a longer article, but sadly that was not to be. Here is that letter, which reflects Roger's boundless enthusiasm for nature...

As I learn that the Thames Valley Water catchment is now drying up, I enclose a checklist of random species which were familiar to me and my brother, Peter, during the war years, to see if anyone at Epsom now has any record of the changes.

Please forgive my out-of-date terminology but here is a checklist from my memory of the Epsom environment of 60-plus years ago.

1. Roadside gutters from the Chapel to the Sanatorium (now Fayrer) held glow worms in summer and pill beetles in October. 2. The old squash courts were an unfailing moth trap for winged insects, mainly hunting wasps, beetles, underwings etc. 3. Hay fields adjacent to the south side of school grounds had a full complement of downland flowers and associated insects (possibly Chalk Hill Blue butterflies). 4. Corncrakes nested at Epsom Downs Station. 5. Nightingales sang by day in Oxshott Woods.

6. Nightjars were audible on North Surrey Heathland. 7. Crested newts and dragonfly larvae in Burgh Heath Pond. 8. Three different types of stag beetles were found in the decayed stumps of Nork Park. 9. Pearl-bordered and small pearl-bordered fritillaries in Yew Tree Bottom in hawthorn and sloe scrub (now built on?) 10. High brown fritillaries common on Ashtead Heath. 11. Mulleins by the tennis courts with yellow, black spotted caterpillars of moth of the same name in July. 12. Tiger beetles made good use of the spoil heaps put out in the war to deter gliders from landing.

This is just a random cross-section from the war years when the rising tide of London concrete was checked.