

ROY RHODES

June 8th, 1945 – March 31st, 2022



"Mr. Wilson?"

"Aye!"

"Mr. Rhodes?"

"Aye!"

This brief formal exchange, reminiscent perhaps of David Livingstone's meeting with Henry Stanley in deepest Africa one and a half centuries ago, took place on the 29th of September, 1966, by the bridge over the Glaze on Jenet's Lane. We ambled along towards Windy Bank, exchanging tales of our days at Leigh Boys' Grammar School, all the while standing quietly as Roy pointed out the calls of Common Snipe, Lesser Redpoll, Bullfinch and Willow Tit and in doing so made me aware that bird identification often begins with sound rather than sight. Upon reaching Windy Bank and the edge of Bedford Moss, he regaled me with tales of weekends spent camping there with friends and suggested that our next walk together should be an introduction to the mossland stretching from there to Astley.

In the next few years, much of my birdwatching was spent alone, or with Frank Horrocks and occasionally Charlie Owen, on the North Bank of Pennington Flash and sometimes my wanderings would take me to the south bank fields and Bill Hayes's (Sorrowcow Farm) where I would meet Roy again. Little did we realise then that the wonderful open habitats on both banks of the flash would one day be destroyed by the antics of the clueless tree-planting brigade and sundry anonymous "beautifiers". Before anybody else, Roy had determined that such reckless abuse of our open spaces needed to be challenged and this led to him, quietly and almost single-handedly, emerging as the true champion of wildlife conservation in the Leigh area. The list below gives just a few examples of his commitment to the cause in the early 1970s:-

- Organising, with the late Raymond Yates, a programme of practical conservation management work at Low Hall Park;
- Acquiring permission from Abram UDC to repair fences at the sewage works overlooking Lightshaw Hall Flash and erect a hide there for photographic purposes.
- Serving on the South-East Regional Committee of the Lancashire Naturalists' Trust.
- Carrying out a detailed breeding bird survey of Risley Moss for the Warrington New Town Conservation Group which may well have gone some way towards the mossland acquiring reserve status.
- Meeting with NCB officers to acquire a lease for the LOS Reserve at Astley Moss (for the peppercorn rent of £1 per annum).
- Leading, with Jennifer, the LOS volunteers who mounted the Leigh Library display about the proposed creation of the Pennington Flash Country Park.

The Pennington Flash exhibition was but one of many events to publicise local conservation and make local people aware of the natural treasures on our own doorstep and beyond. A lecture/slide show to the Leigh Local History Society entitled "Birds of the Leigh Area" in the March of 1972 was followed by a series of five phenomenally successful RSPB film shows in St. Joseph's Hall in Leigh, the first attracting an audience of about 400. Unsurprisingly, this publicity coincided with membership of the Society increasing from 60 in 1972 to 170 three years later. We were well and truly on our way and Roy's role as Treasurer kept him on his toes when he wasn't enjoying life in green open spaces which he had, and always would, be promoting to the best of his many abilities!

Although some may have regarded him as just another birdwatcher, Roy Rhodes was far more than that. He was the complete naturalist with a curiosity and thirst for knowledge of the wild world unmatched by any of my many acquaintances apart perhaps from Tom Edmondson, a distant admirer who shared Roy's passion for conserving our local natural heritage. He had no interest in ticking off the names of uncommon or rare species he'd seen, even though Great Reed Warbler at Sorrowcow Farm pond and Golden Eagle near Belmont were wonderful "finds", and his quest for total accuracy in identification is no better exemplified than when I asked him why he would not wish to claim his sighting of a Purple Sandpiper at Pennington as a genuine record. His response "Because I was only 99% sure." He was equally diligent in making accurate identifications of plants and insects, never dreaming of guessing the names of faded moths he'd captured on our occasional jaunts to Byrom Wood and Windy Bank or ever changing a probability into a certainty.

Steve Martin's masterpiece on Roy's wonderful moorland legacy goes far beyond what I'm able to produce for his time in the Flatlands, but his influence on the wildlife conservation close to Leigh was immense. Sadly, he was desperately disappointed that the Hope Carr Reserve which he had designed and promoted suffered management neglect and his massive documentation of the habitats and their flora and fauna of Bickershaw has yet to be fully appreciated (as far as I am aware).

It's inappropriate to end this brief account on a negative note for Roy deserves better and I will, therefore give three examples of typical behaviour by my dear friend. On an orchid mooch at Bickershaw he lagged behind as he found the goings-on at the numerous anthills far more fascinating and amusing. On a sunny afternoon at Windy Bank he tried to fathom out how to climb halfway up an oak tree, carrying a dish of some sugary concoction in the hope that it would tempt one or two Purple Hairstreak butterflies down from the canopy so that he could at least get a look and at most a close-up photograph of one of the tiny beauties. And, when opening up two moth traps at St. Catherine's Primary School at Lowton and finding over 700 specimens, he was clearly moved and delighted when a young lad raised his hand and said to Roy - "Please Sir! When I grow up, I want to be a mothman like you!" This youngster may not turn out to be as

dedicated a naturalist as Roy Rhodes, but if he has the good fortune to acquire and display even a few of my friend's attributes - kindness, reliability, generosity, tolerance, enthusiasm, honesty and many more endearing qualities - then good people everywhere will benefit from his contribution to make our world a better place for all.

The shortest of exchanges on the track leading a special mossland area began our friendship. At our parting, in the beautiful West Pennine Remembrance Park, I spoke to myself - "Farewell, dear friend! And thank you!"

David Wilson

June 2022