

TRIBUTE TO TOM CAIRNS

Ole Thomas Cairns was born on 8th June 1949 in Germany to his Norwegian mother and Northern Ireland-born father. The family moved to Northern Ireland, then to Norfolk and later to Lower Swainswick, near Bath. It was in the local primary here that he gained his passionate love of nature and the countryside which stayed with him so strongly all his life.

After school he took a BSc course at Bath and became involved in conservation whilst working for the Bath Preservation Trust, saving a row of Georgian workers' cottages from demolition by the less than enthusiastic City Council. Return visits to Norway furthered his love of nature and he would go for solo walks out into the wild.



He took one of the first Master's degrees in conservation and commuted from his house in Widcombe to Westminster where he advised the Government on the Wildlife and Countryside Act, a major piece of legislation. Other positions included a project managing the Albert Dock in Liverpool whilst working for the Civic Trust.

Moving to Devizes he took up a post with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, an organisation with which he was involved to the end and where he made so many good friends. He also worked for the Grazing Advisory Partnership based in Brinkworth, Wiltshire, organising a body including the Ministry of Defence, National Trust and Rare Breeds Survival Trust. Its aim was the use of cattle native to the specific areas involved, to maintain the fragile ecosystem which was at risk from invasive or over-dominant species such as bracken. This is now standard practice.

In 2012, having taken up a new job in Lincolnshire managing schemes to maintain saltmarshes using native breeds, he collapsed at work and was rushed to hospital. Tests revealed that he had suffered a heart attack having contracted a disease of the heart muscle. The condition was so serious that he had to retire from work and return to his beloved Devizes. He fully recovered and made a point of enjoying life to the full.

In 2015, he was seriously injured in a road traffic accident and taken to Southmead Hospital, Bristol, where it was feared he would lose his leg. In a major operation the leg was saved. Whilst recovering he suffered a severe flu-like illness; polymyalgia was diagnosed. Some months later tests showed that he had cancer, the illness from which he finally succumbed.

All the while Tom maintained his social life and was a great inspiration to friends and colleagues, who will continue to have happy memories of Tom. Here are two such memories...

In February 1978, Tom invited my heavily pregnant wife Ali and I to have a curry at his third-floor flat in Lansdown, Bath. We had known Tom by this time a couple of years and I knew he had photographed many flower species. Tom intended, after a leisurely meal, to show us slides of some of his flower pictures. However, as we ate, Ali was getting contractions, but didn't say anything at the time, or when Tom and I got engrossed in the slideshow. Eventually she mentioned that contractions were coming at three-minute intervals, and perhaps we ought to go off to the hospital. This created a dilemma for Tom and I, because we were just getting to the slides of the frog orchid, which at that time I had never seen. Ali was insistent that we HAD to go, so Tom helpfully rattled through the slides at speed so that I could get a view of the plant before helping Ali shuffle down six flights of stairs. All went well and the following day the first visitor to the side of Ali's bed was Tom with a bunch of flowers.

I have below included a photo that Tom took of the Ghost Orchid in 1978/9, one of the last times it was seen in Britain. My memory is of waiting by the car until Tom ran out of film taking pictures whilst laid prone on the floor of Beech woodland, "somewhere in Southern England".

Dave Green



Tom had more jobs at the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust than anyone else that I can remember, often re-inventing himself to fit the job - another of Tom's skills. He therefore had more 'leaving dos' than anyone else, with gifts of a new pullover on each occasion, as I recall – he was famous for his knitwear!

Tom's wide knowledge of natural history was astounding. We would often be talking on a particular subject, when Tom would go off at a tangent about some related detail which I knew nothing about. It was always interesting and often humorous.

Tom had a vast collection of classic films on VHS, 'I filled a room with those' being a typical comment. He also had a complete (as far as I know) collection of first editions of the New Naturalists books. It was obvious that these gave him pleasure.

He was celebrated for his karaoke performances at parties (any excuse for a party was good enough for Tom; he knew how to enjoy himself!) His musical tastes were indeed wide and varied; many of the CDs I copied for him would be summarised by him as 'really great, never heard them before'.

His sense of humour and fun go without saying. He often blamed me for influencing his sense of humour. He'd laugh at terrible jokes and make you feel a better person! There are rumours of Tom's love of cider... I never saw this, as whenever I had a drink (or two) with him, it was beer - real ale, of course. When we both lived in Devizes, we would regularly meet up in The Southgate, sit in the corner like two old codgers (which we were), and talk about anything and everything and put the world to rights. Tom always seemed to have his umbrella, whatever the weather!

Paul Darby