

GIGI CROMPTON (1922–2020)

Gigi Crompton, BSBI Recorder for Cambridgeshire for 30 years (from 1972 to 2002) and an honorary member of the Society since 2011, died at her home on 12 January 2020. She was 97. Poor physical health had latterly kept her house-bound, whilst macular degeneration had gradually robbed her of much of her sight, but she dealt with all this with a characteristic determined spirit. Her botanical career alone makes for interesting reading, but Gigi's long life had been a rich and varied one even before she turned to plants. She was born at Feldafing, near Munich in southern Germany, on 16 April 1922, the only child of the American-born art historian, art dealer and publisher George Martin Richter and his German-born wife, Baroness Amely Zündt von Kenzingen. Richter had earlier studied in both the USA and Europe and had come to live in Munich in 1905. His daughter was christened Irmingard Emma Antonia Richter, but apparently had trouble pronouncing Irmingard and was known as Gigi from an early age. The German author Thomas Mann, who became her godfather, had been present in the house at her birth and indeed had loaned money to her father to buy the house so that he had a quiet place to write, away from his own family. Gigi inherited a considerable volume of material relating to Thomas Mann, much of which has now either been sold or passed on to museums.

The family moved to Settignano above Florence in 1924, where her father was continuing his

research and where she learned Italian. With the rise in fascism in Italy, they moved again, in 1929, to England. Here Gigi struggled at first to learn English and hated the first day school she attended at Purley (Surrey), where she was known as 'Wormy Army', but subsequently moved to a boarding school (Hayes Court) in Kent which she enjoyed. There she met two daughters of Humphrey Gilbert-Carter (then Director of Cambridge University Botanic Garden). The head mistress, Katherine Cox, introduced her to the Latin names of plants and remained a friend after her retirement to Cambridge. Summer holidays were sometimes spent in Venice, where her father rented a house on Giudecca, and was then working on a major book on the Italian artist Giorgione, which was eventually published in the USA in 1937. Gigi recalled she and her mother became 'bored to death' by Giorgione and by the 'endless Tintoretts'! After her general schooling she studied at Westminster Art School and then in Berlin where she lived with her mother's brother, whom she described as a 'horrid Nazi'. She never rated her own skills as an artist.

In 1939, on the day before the Second World War broke out, and all of them having American passports, the family left for New York on the liner *Arandora Star*. In New York the Richters were introduced to the New York art world by her mother's cousin, the artist Baroness Hilla von Rebay. Clearly influenced by her father she trained in art

conservation under Sheldon Keck at the Brooklyn Museum and then worked as a conservator at the Fogg Museum in Harvard. Her father had brought with him a remarkable photographic art collection, which eventually comprised over 60,000 images and numerous cuttings and contained a record of many works of art in museums and collections in Europe, some of which were to be lost, destroyed or stolen in the War. After his death in 1942 this collection was sold to the National Gallery of Art in Washington with financial help from Solomon Guggenheim, and the proceeds from this sale provided for Gigi and her mother. It is now treasured there as the Richter Archive. Subsequently Gigi and her mother drove over to the west coast to see relatives in California (where her father had been born in San Francisco in 1875) and Gigi recalled wonderful lunches given by Thomas Mann at the Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles.

Gigi by then was in her twenties, and clearly a lively, attractive and well-connected individual. She later recalled having many lovers and, by her own account, at least twenty proposals of marriage. However, she and her mother returned to England as soon as the War ended, initially on a

3-month residence permit, but eventually, through the assistance of the Director of the Tate Gallery (Sir John Rothenstein) and the Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts, she obtained a working visa. It was only later in life that she became a naturalised British citizen. She settled into the liberal artistic society of London, and for a time was employed by the London Gallery in Brook Street, where one visitor recalled the ‘beautiful German picture restorer’ who worked upstairs! Indeed at this time it is recorded she had a long affair with the Surrealist artist (and owner of the gallery) Roland Penrose, who before the War had championed the work of artists such as Henry Moore and was a friend and later biographer of Pablo Picasso. One account describes Gigi at this time as a ‘quiet, refined and gentle’ person, perhaps in contrast to the photographer Elizabeth (‘Lee’) Miller, with whom Penrose had previously been involved and whom he later married. Penrose had given her a gouache by Paul Klee, which she gave to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in 2016, having earlier sold Penrose’s *Le Grand Tour* to the Tate in 1964. At the time of her death there was still an original signed Henry Moore sketch on her



Plate 1. Gigi Crompton at 7 Mall Studios, Parkhill Road, Hampstead, in 1946, accommodation she was renting at the time from Henry Moore. Photo © the estate of G. Crompton.

study wall, an ethereal rendition of the potential forms of his famous reclining figures.

In 1948 Gigi was part of a small group invited to Berlin to report on the state of the arts in the immediate post-war period and wrote up an account in her 'Berlin Letter' in the arts magazine *Horizon* that year. On New Year's Eve the following year, she married the American-born David ('Buzzy') Crompton, to whom she had been introduced by Wilfred Roberts. Buzzy was then studying at the Architectural Association in London and was to develop a career in town-planning. They had a flat in London, which they later passed to Henry Moore, an artist whom Gigi clearly admired (and from whom she had previously rented a studio in Hampstead – see Plate 1). She had written about his work in the journal *Art in America* in 1947 suggesting that he was one of the few contemporary artists to maintain his artistic integrity and direction and not compromising to suit public taste. This approach clearly mattered to Gigi, as 50 years later, when I approached her with concerns about my undertaking a new Cambridgeshire Flora, but using a rather different approach to other recent county floras, she firmly suggested I should go ahead and 'do what you want to', advice I heeded.

Shortly after her marriage Gigi had a serious operation and as an aid to her recuperation Graham Greene had offered them the use of his villa in Capri, but after they drove down there it was so cold they left after two days to stay in Cap Ferrat. This further literary connection came about as Greene had a long and well-documented affair with Buzzy's sister Catherine, who before the war had married the Cambridgeshire landowner Harry (later Baron) Walston, whose Anglo-American father, Sir Charles Waldstein, later Walston, had been the second Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum and subsequently second Slade Professor of Fine Art in Cambridge.

For a time Buzzy worked with William (later Baron) Holford and H. Myles Wright, whilst they were developing their Report, published in 1950, on the development of Cambridge. This had proposed amongst other things a 'spine relief road' for the city

and an eastern entrance to the railway station, neither of which was subsequently completed. During this time the couple lived in a small cottage at Heydon in the far south of the county, and it was here that Gigi began to take a serious interest in plants. Subsequently, when Buzzy was lecturing at the Department of Civic Design at Liverpool University, they lived above a greengrocer's shop in Liverpool and Gigi was a freelance conservator at the Walker Art Gallery in the city. When in 1952 Buzzy's work took him back to London they returned permanently to Cambridgeshire, having been offered the tenancy of a house in the complex of farm buildings on the Walston estate. Her mother, who had at first returned to Germany, joined them here in 1955 and lived with them until her death in 1988.

At Thriplow Gigi's knowledge of gardening and garden plants was fostered by the Walstons' gardener, Stanley Cooper. She had also made contact with John Gilmour (then Director of the Cambridge University Botanic Garden) who recommended she attended lectures on botany provided for the Garden students and it is clear that she quickly acquired a good knowledge of plants, aided by amongst others Max Walters (then Curator of the University Herbarium). By the mid-1950s she was clearly already an able field botanist and did a great deal of recording for the first BSBI Atlas in the 10km square TL44 in which Thriplow is situated. In the 1960s and early 1970s she had taken a particular interest in some damp species-rich meadows on the Thriplow estate and wrote regular reports in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* on the effects of new management regimes. She summarised this work in a characteristic paper on the history and flora of the meadows in 1972. In fact her first publication in *Nature in Cambridgeshire*, in 1959, had been an historical account of The Peat Holes of Triplow (*sic*) and this interest in the botanical history of the county would become a feature of her botanical work. This culminated in her innovative *Catalogue of Cambridgeshire Flora Records Since 1538*, privately printed in three parts between 2001 and 2004 (with a searchable version made available online through the invaluable assistance of Martin Hodge and Buzzy's nephew Bill Walston).

This work drew together and ordered an enormous body of records from published and unpublished sources, annotated floras, herbaria and individual recorders. It will continue to be a vital resource for Cambridgeshire botanists in the future.

In 1956 Gigi had been a founder member of the local Wildlife Trust (originally styled the Cambridge and Isle of Ely Naturalists' Trust) and served on its Council for many years, with only a break in the mid-1960s when she was for a period Honorary Assistant Secretary and then Honorary Secretary. At least one annual report from the Trust in this intervening period suggested that 'with her gift for organisation she ensured that the office ran smoothly even when she was away'. This organisational skill was also reflected in the fulsome tributes from Max Walters and many others for the smooth organisation of two subsequent conferences in Cambridge – the BSBI Conference on Floristic Studies in Europe in 1974 and the last Flora Europaea Conference in 1977.

The Cromptons had moved from Thriplow to their final permanent home at Swaffham Bulbeck in 1965, where they created a garden which was a particular treasure trove for the lovers of home-grown fruit. The large orchard and the sides of most of the garden walls were planted with numerous cultivars of cooking and eating apples, and with pears, peaches, nectarines, plums and damsons, as well as figs, medlars, quinces, cherries, and various nuts, supplemented with a fruit cage full of soft fruit and vegetables. In pride of place, however, was a croquet lawn, maintained to a high standard by Buzzy. They both played the game with skill and serious competitive spirit, the lawn overlooked by a carefully chosen garden of white-flowered plants that ran along the back of the house. Extra help at fruit-picking time was always appreciated and surplus material dispersed to anyone who asked. This property was left to the Wildlife Trust by Gigi in her will, a telling demonstration of her long-term commitment to its aims.

Gigi had early on worked as an assistant to Max Walters in bringing together data on all the species of *Silene*, work which gave her confidence when working in libraries and herbaria, whilst in 1966/67

she had been secretary to the Teesdale Defence Committee. Through working with Dr Alex Watt on his long-term vegetation plots she also developed a strong interest in Breckland, especially Lakenheath Warren, and in 1972 prepared a long report on this area for the Nature Conservancy Council (*History of Lakenheath Warren: a historical study for ecologists*), having earlier compiled a comprehensive *Breckland Bibliography* in 1969. From 1972 to 1986 she was engaged by the Nature Conservancy Council to work on the Eastern England Rare Plants Survey, developing the standard methodology for recording rare plant populations. Her industry in tackling this work was phenomenal, not only in current field surveys, but also on the historical research. Ken Adams (BSBI Recorder for Essex), for instance, reports that she compiled a huge compendium of Essex rarities with detailed maps and site plans and that he has a 3-inch thick ring-file labelled 'Gigi Crompton'.

In her long stint as a BSBI Recorder, she provided 25 annual reports of new plant records for the county in *Nature in Cambridgeshire*, latterly often in conjunction with Chris Preston, or with Derek Wells who was for many years her Co-Recorder. Her assiduous gathering in of new records made by many local botanists resulted, in 1983, in the publication of *A Checklist of the Flora of Cambridgeshire* written with Harold Whitehouse who was responsible for the accounts of mosses and liverworts. This Checklist included the first clear delimitation of the vice-county boundary and brought up to date the 10km square distributions for all plants recorded in the county. Gigi was exceptional in her ability and willingness to find positive comments on new records sent to her, so encouraging recorders to keep up the good work. When she opted to come and see a new find, you knew you had found something special!

Gigi's other contributions to botany, both local and national, included an unpublished detailed study of *Blysmus compressus* (for a time she was BSBI referee for the genus and *B. compressus* had been a feature of the Thriplow meadows), an account published in *Watsonia* in 2000 of the herbarium of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century

Wisbech botanist William Skrimshire, written with Charles Nelson, as well as an interest in the flora of the Devil's Ditch. She had a particular interest in *Himantoglossum hircinum* (Plate 2), and in particular in the meticulous long-term monitoring of the population of *Himantoglossum hircinum* on the Ditch. She drew a long list of young and enthusiastic volunteers into this study and when for a period there was a spate of reported orchid thefts elsewhere in the country, she persuaded the Jockey Club to allow a 24-hour watch to be kept on the main colony. Many of the young wardens recruited have since gone on to work in ecology and conservation. Since 1970 she had been a member of a management committee concerned with the Ditch, with many meetings hosted at her house; the committee eventually evolving into a group of 'Friends' who still meet regularly to discuss its management and biological recording. Gigi eventually handed over to me her exhaustive unpublished checklist of all the botanical records from the Ditch, and following three years of further intensive field work I was able to augment this and it was eventually published in *Nature in Cambridgeshire* in 2011. It was characteristic of her that she had drawn me in to an interest in the Ditch flora whilst I was a graduate student. She seemed to have an eye for spotting potential projects for aspiring young botanists. Indeed many people have commented on her willingness and generosity in assisting others with their botanical endeavours and later in life she was always pleased to welcome visitors to hear about discoveries over lunch or tea and cake, although I often found it was impossible to leave the house without accepting a gin or vodka and tonic as well!

The welcoming rambling house at Swaffham Bulbeck was full of interesting books, maps, prints and paintings, a harpsichord made by Buzzy (who died in 2007), cases of stuffed birds and a remarkable collection of china and porcelain, which she maintained she had been able to collect using the money saved when she stopped smoking. It included some exceptional creamware and rare pieces by Eric Ravilious. There had also been a succession of cats, most recently a blue and then a chocolate British



Plate 2. Gigi Crompton at a *Himantoglossum hircinum* site, Saily-Laurette, France, 15 June 1984. Lynne Farrell

Shorthair, both called Pushkin, friendly animals whose feeding was a task Gigi insisted on doing herself right to the end.

Gigi's intelligence, determination and drive to get things done and to do them well, could sometimes make her intolerant of others who did not achieve these standards, and in later life she could sometimes seem a little imperious. However, she was always happy to discuss and argue a case, always keen to encourage and support initiatives. Other correspondents have reminded me of her slightly bohemian sense of dress (I think it was the range of coloured berets that did it) and remember her as charming, sociable, good-humoured and with a heart of gold. It was a long life, well spent.

In putting together this account I have drawn heavily on the moving account given at Gigi's cremation service by her friend and former tenant at Swaffham Bulbeck, Kirsty Findlay, as well as the account of her life prepared by Lynne Farrell for *Nature in Cambridgeshire*. Prof. Peter Grubb also provided some extensive notes he had made after a long conversation he and his wife had had with Gigi about her life, whilst Jane Bulleid, Chris Preston and Bill Walston have been generous with their advice and assistance.

Alan Leslie