

BARRETT, JOHN HENRY (1913-1999), naturalist and conservationist

Name: John Henry Barrett
Date of birth: 1913
Date of death: 1999
Spouse: Ruth M Barrett (née Byass)
Child: Jane Barrett
Child: Robert Barrett
Child: Richard Barrett
Child: Michael Barrett
Parent: Evelyn Marion Barrett (née Back)
Parent: John Ambrose Barrett
Gender: Male
Occupation: naturalist and conservationist
Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture
Author: David Saunders

John Barrett was born in King's Lynn on 21 July 1913, the eldest of four children of John Ambrose Barrett, a chemist at a brewery, and his wife Evelyn Marion. His father was killed on 31 July 1917 while serving as a signals officer with the Rifle Brigade on the Western Front; he was amongst the first to be buried in the New Irish Farm Cemetery, Belgium.

Barrett attended schools in Norwich and Southwold, followed by Repton from 1927 to 1932, leaving to go to Cambridge to read zoology. He subsequently changed to economics and then geography. It was not until 1932 that he paid any attention in the natural world, but in that year he 'discovered' T. A. Coward's *The Birds of the British Isles and their Eggs*. Among those who influenced him was the great Norfolk naturalist Ted Ellis and Jim Vincent renowned keeper at Hickling Broad.

On leaving Cambridge Barrett was asked by the University Appointments Board if he had ever considered looking after elephants in the jungles of Upper Burma. An hour later he was signed on with a sailing date. He served with J. H. Williams ('Elephant Bill') but sadly his adventure came to an abrupt end when he caught cerebral malaria. After a ten day journey to hospital in a basket on an elephant came the bitter disappointment of being invalided home.

In March 1937 Barrett was accepted for a four year commission with the RAF, and as part of his training he spent time at Penberth camp near Pwllheli where Welsh nationalists set fire to the only hangar. Years later he received an honorary degree from the University of Wales in the company of [Saunders Lewis](#), one of the three responsible for the fire.

In 1940, he married Ruth Byass who supported him loyally in all his many activities and enterprises. They had four children, Jane born in 1941, Michael in 1942, Richard in 1946 and Robert in 1951.

In September 1941 the now Squadron Leader Barrett was posted to Linton, near York to the first Halifax squadron only to be shot down on his first flight over Germany. He landed safely by parachute in Schleswig Holstein, and spent the next years in a succession of prisoner of war camps across Germany and Poland. Among those he met was John Buxton captured in Norway who knew Skokholm well having married Marjorie, one of Ronald Lockley's sisters, George Waterston badly injured in Crete and who later was to restore livelihood to Fair Isle, and Peter Conder captured with the 51st Highland Division at Saint-Valery-en-Caux in June 1940 and who as warden of Skokholm 1947-1954 was to become so closely associated with him after the war.

Barrett was part of the support team for the 'Wooden Horse' escape from the East Compound of Stalag Luft III in 1943. Throughout the long years of captivity he studied birds, in particular the chaffinch and tree sparrow, though tragically his priceless field notes were lost as the prisoners were moved westwards away from the advancing Russians across Germany towards the end of the war.

Following his release, and now a Wing Commander, a career in the peace-time RAF did not appeal, and his choice of a career was a direct consequence of his prisoner-of-war experience when natural history had lightened the darkness of those long years. Barrett was appointed in 1947 by the infant Council for the Promotion of Field Studies - later the Field Studies Council - as Warden of the recently established Dale Fort Field Centre, Pembrokeshire.

These were epic pioneering years at Dale Fort with few financial resources, and Barrett was just the man to steer them while at the same time developing ways and means of identifying seashore animals and plants, and interpreting in his own inimitable fashion the extraordinary geology and landscape of west Pembrokeshire. He claimed never to have read an A-

level syllabus, but developed his own to cover the essentials of the Pembrokeshire coast. Few were disappointed by the results, however woe betide those who did not keep up with his walking pace, they were simply left behind!

In addition to Dale Fort Barrett was responsible for the transport of visitors and supplies to Skokholm. On his retirement from the Field Centre in 1968 he took on a new challenge with the establishment of the Pembrokeshire Countryside Unit at Broad Haven where he pioneered the enormously popular guided walks programme along the coastal footpath and the equally popular evening lectures. There was none better than Barrett himself to open people's eyes to the delights of the Pembrokeshire coast where there is so much to see and to discover. Such was the success that his initiative was quickly taken up in other national parks and the wider countryside.

He was a regular broadcaster on natural history programmes, both radio and television and perhaps best remembered are the listeners' question sessions with Derek Jones in the Living World or Wildlife series. In collaboration with Professor Maurice Yonge he produced the first field guide to the seashore - *Collins Pocket Guide to the Seashore* (1958). Over period of fifteen years, 1974-1989, his The Countryman column was published in the Western Mail. Other publications included the much acclaimed *Plain Man's Guide to the Dale Peninsula* and at least twenty-seven scientific notes and papers on such diverse subjects as the breeding habits of the chaffinch, a curlew killing a crab and an aerial survey of the gannet colony on Grassholm.

He served on numerous committees both local and national, countryside, maritime and ecclesiastical, while from 1982 until 1987 he was editor of [Nature in Wales](#). He received an MBE for services to conservation, an honorary MSc from the University of Wales, the 1989 National Park Award and the 1996 H. H. Bloomer award of the Linnean Society for services to biology by an amateur biologist.

John Barrett died in Torestin Nursing Home, Tiers Cross, Pembrokeshire on 9 February 1999 and following a service at St James' Church, Dale was cremated at Parc Gwyn Crematorium, Narberth. Subsequently a Memorial Service was held on 22 July 1999 at St James' Church.

Author

David Saunders

Sources

John H. Barrett, Some of My Days (an unpublished, and from 1956 onwards incomplete memoir written for the family in 1994)

The Western Telegraph, 13 March 1996

John H. Crothers, *Field Studies Council Magazine*, Autumn 1996

Obituaries in *The Western Telegraph*, 17 February 1999; *The Island Naturalist*, Spring 1999; *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 August 1999

[J. H. Barrett, MBE, MA, MSc, 1913-1999](#) in *Field Studies*, 9 (2000), 549-54

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [John Barrett](#)

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