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Monica Green

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It was with very great sadness when we learned that Monica Green, long standing Secretary to the British Herpetological Society for so many years, had passed away. Monica was among the founding members of the BHS, and perhaps the last link to the elite group from those early years.

Her father was a talented draughtsman for GWR Paddington and her mother Marie, a self-educated woman, was a secretary. Monica was an only child, coming from a loving family with a dog called Spot. Her family – aunt and grandparents - lived in Dollis Hill Lane, Cricklewood, London, since the houses were built in 1929. Her grandfather was a coachman for a wealthy family in Portman Square, later driving their car. When he retired and left the mews house, his employers helped him to buy 28 Dollis Hill Lane, which was to become Monica's house and home.

Monica had a good secondary education and left school at 16; in a different age she would have gone to university. She used to say “people of my class didn't go there”. She went instead to Pitman's College for shorthand and typing and then into office work. However, she felt she could do more and went to college to do the Probation Work Diploma. Monica was attached to a court for a number of years, helping young people who had gone astray; she was firm and kind in that job.

Monica married husband Derek in Willesden Methodist Church, and then she lived for some years in Cricklewood. After her husband died about 25 years ago, she came back to Dollis Hill Lane to look after her mother who was getting old and living alone. She arrived in a green Morris Minor estate with a computer and a photocopier. She soon became a stalwart of nearby St Catherine's Church and a great friend of the then vicar, Eric Gaunt. Eric entrusted her with the keys for opening up the church and the hall for funerals and elections.

Monica devoted her life to conservation and the environment and was a great ambassador for it. She was a key figure in the formation of the British Herpetological Society in 1947 and four years later became Secretary/Membership Secretary, a post she would hold for 54 years until she finally retired in 2006. There can be few people to have served any scientific society for even half as long as Monica did. Monica was always a wonderful source of information about the Society, its members and its history. She was an important link with Major Maxwell Knight (radio-naturalist and the inspiration for



Monica's association with ZSL began at a young age . . .

'M' in the James Bond books), whom she remembered among other important herpetologists at the time as one of the founders of the BHS.

With links to London Zoo, she became the port of call for many enquiries regarding reptile emergencies, so if anyone thought there was a python under their floorboards they could call Monica. She was also available for crises with lizards, toads and frogs, as well as rescued tortoises which inhabited her garden.

In 1984 Monica was also involved in the foundation of the Barn Hill Conservation Group, which is based in the Roe Green walled garden. She worked tirelessly thereafter helping to maintain the ancient orchards and hedgerows and would be seen waist deep clearing out the many ponds in Barn Hill and Fryent Country Park, to the great benefit of the frogs, toads, newts and lizards that inhabit the site. Monica also looked after the grounds at St Catherine's Church until she had turned 80. She grew from seed many plants for the church grounds.

Monica saw the highs and lows of BHS history; Presidents and Chairmen came and went while she remained strong, steadfast and dedicated to her role. For some of those long years Monica also simultaneously held the office of Treasurer. She was a tower of strength and offered shrewd, sound advice.

If further testament was needed, some may find it surprising that reptiles and amphibians in general were

not Monica's main interest. "I love my tortoises but I'm not so interested in lizards and snakes" she once said. "I'm really more interested in gardening". This fact alone serves as an indication of the commitment that Monica so selflessly gave so much of her free time to the Society, not to mention the impact it had on her home. Visitors will recall seemingly endless boxes of Journals and Bulletins, which could be found in most rooms and all the way up the stairs.

Although Monica was not well-known within the scientific community, her contribution to the dissemination of research should not be underestimated. For several decades, it was Monica who stuffed journals and bulletins into envelopes, and doggedly transported them on her shopping trolley to her local post office for distribution around the world. She maintained a very efficient filing system for the membership, but didn't actually seem to need it: if there was a query over an individual or institution's subscription status she invariably knew it off the top of her head. The onerous paperwork required for AGMs and Council meetings was always produced punctually and in order.

It is impossible to exaggerate Monica's contribution to the BHS. For decades she was the mainstay of the Society, and its current healthy state is in large part due to her unwavering efforts and devotion over such a long period. Some among us will well remember the crisis, some 25 years ago, when she temporarily left her post as Secretary and Treasurer following the death of her husband. The BHS came close to collapse at that time, but fortunately for us she sailed back to the rescue.

In recognition of her achievements and commitment to the Society, when Monica retired from her secretarial role she was presented with a suitably inscribed memorial bird-bath, made from green Lakeland slate and specially commissioned by the BHS from a stonemason in the Lake District. This was Monica's gift of choice and will now stand proudly in her church garden, to be admired in her memory for many years to come.

Her dedication should be an inspiration to BHS members. She epitomised the friendliness and shared interests of those who made the BHS what it is today.



Monica on the occasion of her retirement from BHS in 2006

She felt personally responsible and even at the end of her secretarial reign at the age of 81, she found it a very difficult decision to relinquish this responsibility. Monica Green was synonymous with the Society and its literature has never been quite the same since it ceased to include her name as an office-holder.

Monica's last years, when she became disabled and wheelchair-bound after fracturing her hip, were made happy and comfortable by the endless loving care she received from her dedicated friend and carer, Olga Itoe. Olga arranged for Brent Council to convert Monica's house for disabled use. This included laying a ramp in the front garden and putting in a wheelchair lift to the upstairs bedroom.

Shortly before Christmas Monica died peacefully at home in Olga's arms at the age of 89. She will be sorely missed by all her friends. She was a great character; outspoken but modest, private but friendly; and above all, inspirational and unique.

Robin Midwinter, Trevor Rose & Richard Griffiths