

Maurice Davenport

12 November 1947 – 10 June 2012

In Christchurch, Dorset, on 10 June 2012, Maurice, the last and youngest of the three remarkable Davenport brothers, passed away to the sound of a Nightingale singing. His nephews, Jeff and Ed, had been called to the nursing home and brought with them a recording of the bird that will always be associated with him. Maurice had moved from Kent to Dorset in the late 1970s and worked there as a taxi-driver. He had been ill for a couple of years; by his own admission, after a lifetime of neglecting his health, and his death was not unexpected. Maurice was cremated in Christchurch on 18 June, a reportedly moving occasion attended, among others, by two long-standing stalwarts of Kentish birding, Andrew Henderson and Ken Chapman. On 12 August his nephews arranged for his ashes to be scattered from the Lampen Wall in Stodmarsh NNR, toasted by a motley band of old birding friends and accompanied by a variety of avian familiars.

Stodmarsh had been one of the East Kent sites closely associated with Maurice in his Kentish birding days and he did much to document its avifauna in the 1960s. Indeed although he left Kent over 30 years ago, his influence on Kentish ornithology from 1963 (when his records first appeared in a KBR) to 1976 (when he last contributed) was both striking and lasting. Like so many Kent birders, his introduction to the best Kentish birding sites was guided by the redoubtable G. B. Rimes, a Latin teacher at his school, Gillingham Grammar. He was introduced to the embryonic Bird Observatory at Sandwich Bay and the mysteries of the Stodmarsh reed beds and the (then) flooded turf fields of Grove Ferry in 1962, when I first met him. It was in these places that he evolved his unique contribution and built up his network of birding friends and acquaintances. They, and the neighbouring woodlands, became his primary haunts for the next dozen or more years.



Maurice Davenport (foreground) with Ian Buckley and Tony Miles-Prouten, Yorkshire 1960

With infectious enthusiasm he embraced all aspects of birding, including ringing and census work. But it was in survey work that he had his biggest influence. This began with rather haphazard searches for the inhabitants of the East Kent marshes, many of the most exciting of which are of course best located in the hours of darkness. In 1965, when most of his contemporaries were immersed in O and A levels, he made a more systematic attempt to count and estimate all the breeding birds of the Stodmarsh-Grove Ferry area. It was in that year that he found the largest number of territorial Savi's Warblers (12) in a single British site for at least a century; and this total has never been approached since. Marshland surveys continued through the 1960s and 70s, often with other contributors, and it is disappointing to see that in spite of many more (and more mobile) observers such efforts seem to have largely evaporated by the 1990s. In 1966 Maurice also turned his attention to what was to become his lasting legacy, the Nightingale Counts. His first survey covered about a third of East Kent woodlands (what he christened the Canterbury Ring Woods). This was extended, with a growing band of well-marshalled and briefed volunteers, to half of the East Kent woodlands in 1967 and then to all of them in 1968.

By this time Maurice had forsaken his home town of Gillingham and his school work, and based himself in the (then) insalubrious Observatory building at Sandwich Bay. Whilst actively supporting the Observatory's ringing and recording work and helping many a younger entrant into birding, his main energies focussed on his Nightingale and other night-bird studies. From 1969 to 1971 the counts covered the whole of Kent and involved up to 200 volunteers. In preparing this obituary I was surprised to discover that although Maurice produced prompt, detailed and colourful reports of each count, nothing was ever formally published. In fact apart from the data included in the KBR individual species accounts for the relevant years, a brief account of the Kentish surveys in the 1977 KBR (no. 26) appears to be the only published record of this unique feat of organisation and commitment. Being Maurice, he did not restrict himself to nightingales and he required we volunteers to record the numbers of owls, woodcock, grasshopper warblers and rarer night singing species as well as mammals and supernatural and astronomical phenomena. Thus he gathered invaluable breeding bird data for the first BTO National Atlas of Breeding Birds which covered 1968-72 and the 1967-73 tetrad maps included in the 1976 Birds of Kent. In 1976 he was invited to organise the National survey of Nightingales on behalf of the BTO. This was, I believe, the first national survey attempted of a relatively widespread, non-colonial species.



Maurice Davenport, Chequers Inn, Sandwich Bay, 1970

Throughout his Kentish “period” (and I have no doubt the rest of his life), Maurice also made a warm impact on the many individuals who came in contact with him. He was highly intelligent, romantic, imaginative and, like his brothers, a true eccentric in the best sense of the word. He had a wicked sense of humour, an original, enquiring mind, bizarre tastes in some trivial areas and a willingness to help and inform. I, and others, cannot recall a cross word with him.

He supported himself initially working in some of the best, and most rural, hostelries in East Kent. Although he had sacrificed his academic and professional future for birds, this particular line of employment suited him in many ways. The hours meant he could do his nocturnal surveying after closing time and he was always free in the early morning. He enjoyed the conviviality of the bar, meeting and discoursing with a wide range of local people as he puffed his *Passing Clouds* and sipped his pint of *Shepherd Neame*. He had a particularly long spell at the *Duck Inn* in *Pett Bottom*, deep in a dry chalk valley surrounded by (then) nightingale-rich woodlands. Here over several years he hosted a May dinner to celebrate the spring. This was graced by a menu card, beautifully illustrated by *Dennis Harle*, on which he inscribed a poetic message to the guests. For me at least those dinners among the nightingales will be my lasting memory of a very special friend of my youth.

By Bill Harvey