

# Owen Sweeney 1943 - 2016

On 9th February 2016, Owen Sweeney lost his long battle with cancer and passed away peacefully at the Wisdom Hospice in Rochester. In passing, Kent conservation lost a true unsung hero and the world lost a very courteous, passionate and respected individual who cared greatly for Natural History and the protection of wildlife and the unspoilt areas of Kent and his native Scotland, where he was born at Blairgowrie in Perthshire. For this he campaigned valiantly in his later years through involvement in various conservation bodies. There will be few, if any, who could raise a bad word for Owen, even opponents in his conservation battles, as he always presented his views with calm and reasoned debate, with politeness and respect but leaving no doubt about his feelings. Owen could diffuse difficult moments with his mischievous humour and often added a touch of Scottishness to meetings and correspondence with phrases sometimes alien to those from south of the Border! Owen's contributions will be greatly missed by the KOS, Kent Wildlife Trust, BTO, RSPB and the Medway Countryside Forum.

At his funeral, at St Thomas of Canterbury Roman Catholic Church in Rainham, many of those present, not least several of his birding colleagues, learnt much that they hadn't known about Owen. His love of football, and support of Gillingham FC, was well known, as was his employment by the MoD and time spent in Cyprus, but much less was known about his earlier time in the Civil Service as a Private Secretary and later as Head of Management Studies Centre concerned with management theory and behavioural psychology, leadership and equal opportunities! At his wake, we learnt of his artistic abilities, demonstrated with a display of his drawings and paintings, which even his sister was not aware of! This highlighted what a private person Owen could be. Not all realised how important the church was to him, as well as his local parish and fellow parishioners.

Most members will first remember Owen through the Medway RSPB group, with his wife Linda, whom he married at Bromley in June 1969. Linda threw herself into voluntary work with the RSPB and so impressed others that she became leader of the Medway Members' Group for some seven years. Also responsible for the sale of RSPB goods, the group topped the league of sales goods in the UK with over £10,000 sold during the RSPB's centenary year. Tragically, after Owen had taken retirement to spend more time with her, Linda also died of cancer.

Owen continued his birding and conservation interests, with bird surveys his main interest. He surveyed for the RSPB's joint Farmer/Volunteer scheme; KWT's initial bird censuses for its new reserve at Nashenden; BTO's Wetland Bird Survey and Garden Birdwatch scheme, as well as the recent BTO Breeding and Winter Atlas. Owen also enjoyed time with other volunteers at Queendown Warren's KWT Tuesday working party and was awarded a Silver Butterfly and Marsh Volunteer Award at the KWT AGM in 2015. Owen loved his garden and was a dedicated participant in the BTO Garden Birdwatch Survey. I remember how pleased he was to get Yellow-browed Warbler on his garden list, feeding on Woolly Aphids in an apple tree, and he wrote a short article for the KOS about the many and varied birds he recorded as part of this scheme. Kent County Council presented Owen with a Gold Award for turning over both his front and back gardens to nature.

In later years, Owen spent much time with his friends and colleagues Rob Clements and Doug Grant, driving Rob to many parts of the county to survey raptors and what were termed “honorary raptors”: Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Hawfinch. Together they covered many hidden corners of the North Downs and the results of their endeavours contributed significantly to the Kent Breeding and Winter Bird Atlas’s, for which Owen submitted over 10,000 roving records! Owen also took on the responsibility of organising the BTO Heronry Census for Kent, which he did with great enthusiasm and admirable thoroughness, from 1999 until health issues, and the replacement of recording cards by an online system, in 2015. Owen was not a devotee of computers.

In addition to hands on survey and conservation work, Owen became a leading member of the Medway Countryside Forum, maintaining close links with Medway Council and commenting on many planning applications. Owen also joined, and became a valued member of, the KOS Conservation and Surveys Committee.

It was the proposal to develop the former MoD land at Lodge Hill, one of the most important sites in the UK for Nightingales that became Owen’s final and greatest battle. Together with his great Nightingale ally, Andrew Henderson, much time was spent discussing latest proposals, survey findings and responses to the planning application, along with colleagues in the RSPB and KWT. I also spent many hours with Owen at meetings with the developers and ecological consultants, or in correspondence with him and Andrew, and recall many midnight (or usually later!) encounters in the woodlands and scrub at Chattenden/Lodge Hill doing Nightingale surveys. Owen loved “his” Nightingales and appeared on national radio and in press interviews defending Lodge Hill. Fittingly, the song of the Nightingale was played as the final event at his funeral. It is so sad that Owen will not be able to participate in the hard-won Public Inquiry in March 2017.

Owen leaves three brothers and a sister, their families and his son Paul, wife Zoe and their children.

In his funeral eulogy, Owen’s son Paul highlighted how his father was always self-deprecating, never sought attention and was not one for blowing his own trumpet. Owen may have been an unsung hero, but I’m sure he’ll allow his beloved Nightingales to do that for him.

Murray Orchard