

John Peters (Sa '55)

John grew up in a war-torn London, close to the site of the former Crystal Palace. His early schooling was disrupted by the war and his family was forced to move house on numerous occasions. He excelled at shooting with .22 while he was at a prep-school in Sussex.

He moved to Bryanston in 1951 and left in 1956. He then spent a year working with a pest-control company, before taking up a place in Trinity College Dublin in 1957. While he was at Trinity he shared lodgings with another Old Bryanstonian, Gerry Mason. He 'converted' his three-year bachelor degree into a masters in ecology after four years.

His first post was an Assistant Warden at Slapton Ley Field Centre and that was where he met Elspeth. They moved north, when he was appointed to become Warden Naturalist for the Teesdale National Nature Reserve and also to oversee all the Sites of Special Scientific Interest in north-eastern England. He became involved in the controversy that surrounded the construction of Cow Green reservoir in upper Teesdale. The argument that a few rare plants would not be lost, but that an irreplaceable habitat assemblage would be inundated, bothered John a great deal. Moving on, he was appointed to a Senior Demonstrator's post in Newcastle University in 1966. His next post was as Chief Biologist to the Water Resources Board and this is where our paths crossed once more. I am eternally grateful to John, following a meeting we had while he was with the WRB and I was Fisheries Officer to the Devon River Authority. I was given leave of absence from the DRA to study for a PhD at Exeter University, having chosen to determine the effects of direct water abstraction from the upper reaches of the River Dart on the population of trout, young salmon and the invertebrates on which they fed. It was necessary for me to collect, sort and identify a very large number of invertebrates. John was instrumental in funding a technician to assist in the laborious task of sorting through samples, so I could identify the invertebrates. John's attempts to complete his own PhD were overtaken by workload, but he helped me to complete my own. Without his help my own research would have ground to a halt. This was the measure of the man, generous in every way.

John moved from the Water Resources Board when it was closed down, into the Central Water Planning Unit of the DOE. He spent 10 years in very senior positions within the department until he took early-retirement in 1980. He then took up a post as a part-time Senior Research Fellow, within Reading University's Department of Agriculture.

John had a distinguished career, but always a man of principle, he was a scientist first and a civil servant second. He was undoubtedly a visionary in relation to water resources and the implications of climate change. On occasions, his vision and his uncompromising scientific principles and integrity did not sit comfortably with his role within the civil service and with some political issues. He was not afraid to express his honest opinions and, good for him, he stuck to his guns – but not a 0.22 on this occasion.

Following his retirement, John and Elspeth moved to a beautiful house in the South Hams and both of them used the house to demonstrate their strong Christian faith. They opened their home in a generous and warm-hearted way, to help others who faced difficulties in their lives. John had considerable expertise in environmental issues and he put this to good effect by active involvement on several local committees. Forever the waterman, he championed attempts to reduce the levels of pollution within the River Avon and he opposed 'managed retreat' attempts to allow the sea to flood a good area of freshwater grazing marsh at the head of the Avon Estuary. This was eventually reverted to tidal saltmarsh, not on the basis of good science as John would have preferred, but on the whim of political dogma.

Peter Beale (OB)