

Obituary

Vicky Schilling, co-founder of Tree Register

We are saddened to record the death, following a relatively short illness, of Vicky Schilling aged 67 on 23rd November 2019. It was Vicky who, together with Alan Mitchell, founded the Tree Register of the British Isles and who subsequently became the central figure in the growth and development of the Tree Register. Vicky's contribution in the formative years of the Charity was unequalled and reflected her passion for trees. She leaves a legacy of tireless endeavour in the recording of notable trees and a growing awareness of their historical value and their continuing contribution to the health of our planet.

She was born Victoria Hallett in Burgess Hill, West Sussex in 1952, the fourth generation of her family to be born there. Her grandfather was gamekeeper at the nearby Heaselands Estate owned by the Kleinwort family which was noted for its formal and woodland gardens including ornamental trees and spectacular displays of native bluebells in spring.

Tree measuring

Aged 20 she went to live in New Zealand, returning to Sussex after three years to learn about spinning and weaving with Hilary Bourne in Ditchling. It was at this time that she obtained permission from its owners to walk the grounds of Heaselands in order to keep a nature diary of the birds and native flora including the measuring of trees, native and ornamental. In order to learn how best to go about it, she asked the leading authority of the day Alan Mitchell for his advice which led to her accompanying him on some of his tree measuring visits to gardens and estates. This, in turn, led to her volunteering as his assistant at the Forest Research Centre, Alice Holt in Surrey.



Vicky in recent times at 'Dogwood' their Ullapool garden
(Photos: Tony Schilling)

Green Scene

When Alan officially retired from his post in 1983, Vicky continued her work on cataloguing Alan's historical tree records which included converting the Imperial measurements into metric. Meanwhile, she continued joining Alan on his many visits to estates around Britain, measuring and recording trees. They briefly set up and ran a consultancy service, 'Green Scene', primarily to help fund costs of travel and other expenses which also involved Vicky organising Tree Identification Field Study Courses and Guided Walks, led by Alan, locally in Surrey and in Scotland. During this period she was

working constantly on preparing tree lists for estate owners and responding to requests for advice and information on tree matters. Her work on collating tree records previously made by Alan had her trawling his vast collection of handwritten index cards. It is impossible to identify the exact number of trees she visited and recorded with Alan but it is unlikely to have been less than 20,000.



New charity

It was in 1987, the year of the 'Great Storm' in South East England, while visiting Snowdenham House and estate with Alan that they met Lord Hamilton of Dalzell. It was he who suggested that they should establish a charity to protect and conserve their tree records for the future. Wasting no time, Vicky took the initiative and persuaded some eminent land owners and horticulturists to become trustees and the Duchess of Devonshire to become its first Patron. The new charity was established in 1988 under the name The Tree Register of the British Isles (TROBI), Vicky appropriately becoming one of its first trustees.

Initiated newsletter

Three years later, in 1991, Vicky married fellow trustee Tony Schilling, then the Curator of Wakehurst Place in Sussex, making their home in a flint-stoned cottage under the lee of the South Downs. The following year she retired as a trustee and took on the official title of Registrar as well as joint secretary assisted by Pamela Stevenson. With a newly acquired word processor she initiated the first newsletter for members of The Tree Register under the title "Leaves from Tree Measurers' Diaries".

Take a step back

It was Vicky who first realised the value in computerising the tree records which, in 1993, had surpassed 100,000. Within two years this had been achieved and she was able to take a step back from her role as Registrar. A whole new chapter for her began in 1997 when she and her husband Tony moved to Ullapool in Scotland. At this point they became joint Honorary Presidents.

In 2004 Vicky retired from the charity but continued to keep closely in touch with Pamela Stevenson sending details of ownership changes she noticed in the papers of many of the estates she had visited whilst tree measuring with Alan.

The Vicky Schilling Bursary

Vicky's life and love of trees will be commemorated by a Bursary which The Tree Register is setting up to support volunteer tree recorders.