Peter Crichton Robinson (1936–2019)

Peter Robinson was born in York on 15 January 1936, grew up in Scarborough and attended the Graham Sea Training School. But rather than going to sea afterwards he took a series of local jobs while developing his lifelong interest in geology and natural history. By 1954 he had become a National Park Voluntary Warden, and in 1957 he joined both the Yorkshire Geological Society and the Botanical Society of the British Isles. He began his geological career in 1957 as a junior laboratory technician in the former Geology Department of Hull University. At that time, it was a very small department and, together with Mike Holiday, Peter provided the whole range of technical support required. There, together with then research student John Catt, he developed a new technique for preparing thin sections of clays. This was published in *Geological Magazine* in 1961. His helpfulness and enthusiasm were already apparent and remained characteristics of Peter throughout his life. His contribution to the department and university extended far beyond his technical role – he took the students’ Harker Geological Society on day excursions to the Yorkshire coast, and was always happy to help them with practical queries. He helped members of the botany department in the field, showing the link between geology and floral distributions in the North Yorks Moors, and he was already building up an important collection of local fossils that he continued to add to for the rest of his career. Peter was very generous at loaning or donating material to both individuals and museums, always meticulously documented.

When I entered the Hull department to read geology in 1960, we soon discovered a mutual interest in Lower Cretaceous ammonites and Peter subsequently donated Speeton Clay ammonites from his collection for my PhD research. But in 1962 he moved to a technician’s job at Sheffield University under Professor Leslie Moore, who soon realised Peter’s potential and encouraged him to retrain as a teacher. So Peter returned to Hull in 1963 to take a 3 year teacher training course, by which time he had passed A-Level Geology through evening classes. Subsequently he taught in Sheffield and then at Scotton Grammar School and during that time, in 1967, he joined the British Butterfly Conservation Society – reflecting yet another area of particular research interest to Peter.

In 1971, Peter left Yorkshire to teach at Pilton Community College in Barnstaple, Devon, where he remained for 17 years. While there, he started an Open University degree course, receiving his BA in December 1980. During his time in Devon, Peter’s interest and expertise in natural history came to the fore, and from 1972–1988 he served as a voluntary warden and part-time employee at Braunton Burrows, a major dune system that forms the core area of the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. There he conducted educational tours, kept daily weather records and helped to protect the site. But his lasting contribution was a study of the effects of grazing on the vegetation. Peter monitored the site every July from 1997 to 2003, produced annual (unpublished) reports and then published the results with two co-authors in 2005, as English Nature Research Report no. 637. Much of this field research was done after Peter had married Rosemary Barnett and returned to Yorkshire in late 1989.

Peter and Rosemary settled at West Ayton, near Scarborough, and Peter immediately got involved with the local community. In particular, he spent many years championing the geology of the Scarborough area and showing its importance to whoever needed to know, from students to local councillors, farmers and major landowners. From 1990 to 1993, he did contract work for Forest Enterprise, leading guided walks, designing routes for visitors and producing a botanical survey for part of Dalby Forest. He worked voluntarily for the North York Moors National Park, Natural England and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. He led very popular public field walks for Scarborough Borough Council’s Dinosaur Coast project, was a founder member of the Ryedale and Scarborough RIGS Group and became a stalwart of the Scarborough Field Naturalists Society, serving as President in 1992 and as their geology recorder. He compiled data on many potential RIGS sites and also carried out extensive field research on local butterflies and botany: Professor Sir David Read FRS has stressed the importance of Peter’s work on the population dynamics of local orchid populations flowering on Sutherbiff Rigg in Dalby Forest, in Yedmandale Wood and on North Bay Terrace in Scarborough. His booklet on *Walking in the Footsteps of William Smith* exemplifies Peter’s breadth of knowledge, beautifully linking the geology and botany of the Hackness area. In addition to all this, Peter took daily weather records at his home in West Ayton from 1990 to late 2016, when he and Rosemary moved to Pickering.

Peter’s meticulously kept field notebooks on his various areas of interest are a mine of information. One of them was exhibited in the Rotunda Museum for several years after its reopening in 2008 as an example of how to keep one. He also donated some of his geological collection to the Scarborough Museums Trust (SMT).

From 2001 to 2007, Peter was a very active member of the YGS Council, and in 2007 his outstanding contribution to our understanding of the local geology and his championing of it was recognized by the award of the Moore Medal. During that period, Peter also actively supported the formation of the SMT, centred around the redevelopment of the Rotunda...
Museum but also including the art gallery and other collections. Lord Derwent, who was the principal initiator of the project, was anxious to see a friends organization developed for the trust. While there were several well-established relevant local societies who could lend support, there was a glaring gap in coverage – geology. So, following on from an initial meeting between Peter Robinson, Will Watts and me in October 2005, Peter produced a discussion document which proposed a ‘Rotunda Geology Group’. As a result, an informal committee was set up and the RGG was ‘launched’ at a well-attended public exhibition of the Speeton Plesiosaur on the then Filey Road campus of Hull University on 24–25 July 2006. Peter played a very significant part in the RGG’s successful development. He was an active committee member and led a field excursion most years from 2008–2016 as well as talking at two members’ evenings and writing several articles for the RGG’s ‘Magazine and Record’. During this time, he also produced The William Smith Trail for the SMT, leading the reader around Smith’s engineering and geological sites in Scarborough, and again mentioning both flora and fauna en route. Peter’s fundamental role in the establishment and continuing success of the RGG was recognized when he was made its first Honorary Life Member in November 2018.

Peter died on 6 February 2019. He bequeathed his field notebooks to the Scarborough Museums Trust, where they will be digitized and made available to all. He will be remembered for his enthusiasm, helpfulness, integrity and honesty, supported by his deeply held religious beliefs and a good sense of humour. Peter is survived by Rosemary, who I thank for providing valuable information, and by his sons David and Adrian from a previous marriage.

Peter Rawson