David Gardner-Medwin, well-respected naturalist, bibliophile and expert on the 18th century wood engraver Thomas Bewick, sadly died on the 14th June 2014 after a relatively short illness. He was one of our most dedicated Society volunteers, committing his time and energy into ensuring that the Society and its museum would continue to flourish and maintain its reputation as a distinguished natural history institution.

David joined the Natural History Society of Northumbria in 1966, after he moved to the North East to take up a research fellowship at the Royal Victoria Infirmary and became more actively involved in the affairs of the Society when he served on Council from 1980 to 1983.

His love of antiquarian books led him to take the position of Chairman of the Library Committee in 1987. He set about, with his colleagues Hugh and Stella Chambers, turning the, then virtually, unused library, from a place for book storage into a functioning centre of research.

Retiring from his prestigious career as a consultant paediatric neurologist in 1997, at the age of 60, David was asked to stand as Chairman of Council, a post requiring his entire commitment and professionalism for six years, until he stepped down in 2002. He was immediately re-elected as a Vice-President of the Society, an honour given to members who have given significant service over a number of years.

David was involved in all of the negotiations surrounding the refurbishment of the museum between the years 2006 to 2009 and he contributed immeasurably to the steering committee established to oversee the building and furnishing of our new museum library. Steve McLean, the then Museum Manager, recounted, “I think it is fair to say that the project would not have been as successful without the input of David and the bridge he formed between the Museum, the University and the Society.”
During the museum decant, David would inevitably be found in the library with his colleagues carefully wrapping the books ready for removal. That completed, he turned his attention to the archives assisting with packaging the remaining heavy or unwieldy items. He was actually one of the last people to leave the museum building undertaking a final inspection with Steve McLean. In his own inimitable way he was making sure that every scrap of paper, artefact or item of furniture of any importance had been salvaged. His rescue of the furnishings was so determined that he found a good home for all of the solid oak library stacks with the Literary and Philosophical Society and even resorted to stowing two large specimen cupboards into his own home.

After the re-instatement of the collections in 2009, David spent many happy hours in the new library, either caring for the library collections, researching his latest article on Thomas Bewick or assisting with some archival cataloguing. He had also, over a number of years, greatly contributed to the collections by donating many fine books and archives – recognising a gap in our holdings he would aim to redress it. When he became aware that his illness was terminal he began planning in earnest to leave his own exceptional assemblage of natural history books to the library. His volumes on John Ray, the 17th-century English naturalist and botanist, and other related early herbals were extremely comprehensive – they are now in the Society’s collections.

His generosity in the bequest of his books and in response to the Society’s call for funds during the museum refurbishment was much like the benefactors of old – he was a true philanthropist.

In honour of his tremendous commitment to the library the Society with our partners in the museum, the Society of Antiquaries and Newcastle University, have agreed to recognise his contribution by renaming our rare book and archive store “The David Gardner-Medwin Room”.

David was extremely self-effacing, he never boasted or even referred to his working life. It came as quite a surprise to realise that he was, actually, an extremely well respected and esteemed medical professional, whose work on the genetically inherited condition Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy was nationally recognised.

He was a courteous and honourable man – a gentleman academic – whose chairmanship of the Society was always thoughtful and considered. However, he was not afraid to ask challenging questions at board meetings, he had extremely high principals and if he thought a course of action was detrimental to the Society he would do his utmost to ensure that other options were considered. He resigned as
Vice President of the Society in 2009 on a matter of principal and thereafter kept a close eye on any changes to the Constitution or Rules of the Society.

David was a great supporter of the Society lectures and events and he was often called upon to talk on his own interests including Bewick, John Hancock, William Turner or John Ray. His lectures were well attended, as he was a respected speaker, and his vast knowledge on the subject of the history of natural history was always meticulously researched and delivered in great depth.

He was also an accomplished naturalist specialising in ornithology and botany. With this expertise he was asked to assist with the editing of the Society’s publication, the *Transactions*; his work was second to none – accurate and erudite. David also contributed a number of his own papers to the *Transactions* as well as writing articles for other organisations including the Bewick Society.

His work ethic was prodigious; he never stopped reading, researching, learning or collecting books. Even in his last few months he regretted the fact that he had failed to complete a set of volumes for his private library.

David was also a family man, he was immensely proud of his children and grandchildren, his family was his highest priority and he enjoyed their regular visits to his home in Northumberland and sharing holidays together. He liked the company of children, having worked with them all his life and took great pleasure in seeing the museum full of young minds investigating and learning. He would never ignore a child, always getting down to their level to speak to them; his family said that his young patients were extremely fond of him because of his kindness and empathy with them and their parents.

In his last days David was to be found in quiet contemplation reading his much treasured book *The Wisdom of God manifested in the Works of the Creation* by John Ray; he keep this leather bound copy close by. At his memorial service, in St Andrew’s Church, Heddon-on-the-Wall, his family placed the book on his casket. He had asked that the service was filled with his favourite hymns, music and readings and a specific request was to play a sound recording of the beautiful eerie ‘whimpering’ cry of the Whimbrel, a bird he had studied in Finland. Poignant sounds that clutched at the heart and made one think of stillness and the beauty of nature. David’s last reminder for us to take a moment from our busy lives to engage with the natural world to look, listen and ponder.

His final words to me, two weeks before he passed away, were to look after the precious collection of books and archives in the Natural History Society’s remarkable collections on his behalf, to make sure they were cared for in the future – a truly remarkable man and one very much missed by his family and friends.

June Holmes 2014
MORE BIOGRAPHIES

David led such a full life that all the details of his work and other interest could not be included in our short obituary, which has only concentrated on his time with the Natural History Society.

The tributes and obituaries listed below give a further insight into his many activities and eventful life.

- A tribute read at David’s funeral by his daughter Dr Janet Gardner-Medwin

An obituary published in the Times and one published in the British Medical Journal by Anne Gulland are available to read in the Society’s archive.

There will also be a reflection on David’s life and work with the Bewick Society in The Cherryburn Times to be published early spring 2015.

PUBLICATIONS


David at Cherryburn with Iain Bain and June Holmes, 2003.