

Remembering Frank Lancaster

PAUL WALKER



Tributes have been paid to Study Group founder member Frank Lancaster, who died in April 2018 aged 86, having been a leading light in butterfly conservation in Wyre Forest.

Frank and wife Pat were instrumental with others in setting up the group in 1991, having moved to Wyre Forest from St Albans, where they had been prominent members of the Hertfordshire branch of the British Naturalists' Association for many years.

At Frank's funeral at Wyre Forest Crematorium on May 18, Rosemary Winnall said of the early days: "At that time there were only a few people recording wildlife regularly in the forest and Frank was one of them. His untiring work on recording butterflies influenced many of us. He kept meticulous records in those pre-computer days and our present Records Room contains many of his annual reports that he generously shared. Frank loved the Wyre Forest and its wildlife. We shall always remember his cheerful disposition, his dedication and encouragement. He was a natural team leader, being organised and reliable, and the conservation management he fought for will remain part of his legacy."

West Midlands Butterfly Conservation spokesman Mike Williams said:

"Joining the fledgling West Midlands branch of Butterfly Conservation in 1986, Frank created a butterfly transect along Dowles Brook, which involved a weekly walk counting butterflies, something he undertook for 16 years along with Pat. His ground-breaking survey and monitoring work continues in the forest today and involves dozens of volunteers every year.

Perhaps less well known was Frank's key role in forging the fruitful partnership that now exists between conservation groups and the Forestry Commission, which has led to vital work to improve habitats for some of our rarer species.

Frank often told how his visit to the Commission office in the dark days of the 1980s to discuss conservation management quickly ended with him being politely shown the door. However, undeterred, he contacted the local MP for help. A meeting was arranged and attended by more senior Commission managers and plans were soon in place to start more sympathetic management in the forest.

Due to his persistence, sites were opened up in the forest to let light into dark places so wildlife could again thrive. On Study Group field days, two of these areas are still referred to as Frank's Clearing and The Diamond Site.

Wyre Forest Study Group



Pat and Frank Lancaster

Rosemary Winnall

The forest we see today of sunny rides and open areas alive with wildlife is Frank's lasting legacy and a reminder to us all that passion, enthusiasm and commitment to the natural world, plus of course a strong sense of fun, something which Frank had in abundance, will take us all a very long way.

Frank's stubbornness, plus a large dose of charm, led him to setting up experimental management at the off-limits Royal Ordnance site at Button Oak to try to save the Grizzled Skipper butterfly. Here he also arranged monthly moth nights during three summers to record night-flying insects, sparking the setting up of the Wyre Forest Moth Group."

Basil Francis Lancaster was born in St Albans in 1932. His education was severely disrupted by the Second World War but this left him plenty of time to spend with his mates exploring the surrounding countryside, scrumping and birdnesting. Despite failing his eleven plus exam, he won a scholarship to Watford Commercial College at 13, where he learned shorthand, typing and accounts. At age 15 he followed his father in joining the former British Rail, where he rose to senior management positions. He would remain with BR his entire career apart from two years of National Service with the RAF.

His organisational ability, plus his camping skills, led him to become Patrol Leader, Rover and eventually Group Scout Leader of the 2nd St Albans Troop. He also had a leadership role in the local YHA group, where he met Pat, the beginning of a devoted relationship that lasted nearly 60 years.

Frank was always a mischievous character with a wicked sense of humour which, despite the onset of Alzheimer's in 2000, never left him. With the unstinting support of Pat, he was able to live well with the disease for many years before spending the last couple of years in a specialist home, where he was much loved by staff.

Having retired early aged 56, he had 12 wonderful years to fulfil his wish to "do something to make a difference".

He is survived by Pat, their three daughters and son and five grandchildren.



Frank wading the River Minram, Whitwell, Sept 1978

Trevor James