

Stephen Laurence Sutton (1938 – 2023)



Stephen Sutton has died after a short illness, aged 85, at his home in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. BMIG offers its sincere condolences to his family in the UK and Sabah.

Stephen was crucially influential in the study of woodlice in Britain and Ireland from the 1960s to the 1980s. He set up the Isopod Survey Scheme (ISS) in 1968, from which the British Isopoda Study Group (BISG) evolved a year later. BISG merged with the British Myriapod Group in 2000 to form the British Myriapod and Isopod Group.

Stephen was born into an academic background at Oxford in 1938. His father, Leslie Ernest Sutton (1905-1992), was a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, teaching Chemistry. His mother Catharine Virginia née Stock (1905-1962), married Leslie in 1932 at Oxford. Catherine was American and Stephen had spent most of the period of the Second World War with his mother and older sister, Virginia, with his mother's relatives in the USA. Stephen attributed his delight in travelling abroad to this childhood experience.

His early schooling was at the Dragon School, Oxford where a contemporary was the eminent dipterist Henry Disney. Stephen's education continued at Marlborough College and then, after two years National Service in the Royal Navy based at Portland, he went up to New College, Oxford to read Zoology. After a short period in industry, which Stephen admitted did not suit his temperament, he started a DPhil at the Bureau of Animal Populations, Oxford with Charles Elton and Kitty Southern. The original intention was to study *Ligidium hypnorum* in Wytham Woods, but Stephen claimed that he saw only one in three years, so he wisely moved to working on the population dynamics of *Philoscia muscorum* and *Trichoniscus pusillus*. This was the first such study on any species of woodlice in the UK.

Appointed as Lecturer in Zoology at the University of Leeds in 1966, Stephen established a small postgraduate research team. Over the next couple of decades those working on woodlice included R.C. Davis, George Fussey, Angela Grundy, Mark Hassall, Keith Sunderland and Rob Willows.

At this time he also renewed a long interest in Lepidoptera, particularly in Yorkshire, including running moth traps in his garden and paddock at Shadwell, near Leeds, and later on the edge of Burn Moor, near Settle. This eventually culminated in the Yorkshire Naturalists Union (YNU) publishing *Butterflies and Moths of Yorkshire* (Sutton & Beaumont, 1989). Stephen was pleased to serve as President of the YNU in 1990 and as a Vice-President for many years thereafter.

The Isopod Survey Scheme (ISS) had started as an initiative by Stephen and John Metcalfe, a friend who was an established teacher at Trinity and All Saints College in Horsforth (now Leeds Trinity University). I teamed up with them in 1969 after a get-together at Shadwell. The development of the recording scheme and BISG is described elsewhere (Harding, 2018).

In 1970 Stephen began writing an introduction to the biology of woodlice, with a particular emphasis on their suitability as organisms for teaching and for simple projects. David Burn, a former student at Leeds who had moved into scholastic publishing, commissioned the book, simply titled *Woodlice* (Sutton, 1972), in a short-lived series - *Invertebrate Types*. It was an opportunity for Stephen to compile a well-referenced 'all you need to know' about woodlice and included an off-printed key to species (Sutton,

Harding & Burn, 1972) with colour portraits of seven species by Hilary Burn. This Key was useful in promoting ISS to potential recorders.

Stephen soon became the go-to person for the media and publishers regarding woodlice and some other invertebrates – see for example Sutton (1980). This also included a sideline in contributing to radio programmes, mainly natural history panels and radio excursions. *The Humble Woodlouse* was broadcast by the BBC in 1973 in the “Living World” series and somewhat later he was involved with a sound recordist in a pioneering programme on the natural sounds of a tropical rainforest. Stephen and David Holdich (who, with Roger Lincoln, had set-up a short-lived scheme in BISG for the marine Isopods) were invited by the Zoological Society of London to organize a symposium on The Biology of Terrestrial Isopods in 1983. This was the first such international symposium and resulted in published proceedings (Sutton & Holdich, 1984) including 27 papers by over 40 authors, mainly on Structure and Physiology, and Population Biology and Behaviour. International symposia have continued to be hosted sporadically in several other countries; see for example Sutton & Harding (1989) and Harding *et al.* (1990).

The woodlouse scheme had been quite slow to grow and it was not until the early 1980s that Stephen and I agreed that we had probably taken this phase of BISG as far as he and I could go. Both of us were progressively moving away from work on Isopods – Stephen to tropical ecology and me to heading the Biological Records Centre. Eventually we found time to compile and edit *Woodlice in Britain and Ireland* (Harding & Sutton, 1985), including a few sessions together at his recently acquired farmhouse (Heigh Head) in Yorkshire, on the edge of Burn Moor, near Settle. The building itself was not in the best of condition, so Stephen was often having to fix aspects such as the roof, water supply, drainage and electricity ‘on the fly’ whilst I struggled to weave analyses of the habitat data into coherent text and also cope with our catering. Stephen always brought a slightly exotic tone to any encounter and these sessions at Heigh Head are now a delightful memory of hard work and companionship with plenty of laughs and a few long walks.

Stephen’s interest in the tropics was certainly fuelled by his involvement in the Zaire River Expedition in 1974/75 led by John Blashford-Snell. It was through this initial work and the contacts that ensued, that he became increasingly involved with Operation Drake and its successor Operation Raleigh. He became a leader for ecological research on these ambitious international projects and later was closely associated with the Royal Society as its scientific involvement in research in Borneo developed, particularly in the Danum Valley. Initially his work in the tropics was based from Leeds University where he still had a role teaching and with research students, but by the 1990s Stephen had moved almost permanently to Kota Kinabalu (KK) in Sabah. Here he extended his interests to books and publishing, establishing an on-line and physical bookshop, Borneo Books, with his partner Rosalind Tsang. The bookshop shared premises with Rosalind’s craft and gift shop in KK. Rosalind and Stephen married in 2006, later with a blessing at St Matthew’s church, Keasden, near Heigh Head. Stephen has described the life of Borneo Books between 1999 and its closure in 2014 (<https://stephensutton.info/>) in a typically self-deprecating and amusing style.

Even before he had settled in KK Stephen began a major project on the Pyraloid Moths of Borneo (see <https://stephensutton.info/>) leading to planned species guides (see Sutton *et al.* 2015, Whitaker *et al.* 2023). His contribution to the conservation and interpretation of the rainforests of Sabah is well recognised and in particular since 2019 with the Kinabalu Birdwing (*Troides andromache*) Conservation Project. The Sabah Minister for State Tourism, Culture and Environment, Datuk Christina Liew, congratulated Stephen and his team when she unveiled the Kinabalu Birdwing as the State Butterfly of Sabah in October 2023.

Stephen’s spontaneous enthusiasm and openness was a powerful stimulus to many that came in contact with him beyond a strictly academic context, myself included. Throughout his professional life he

nurtured the careers of many young biologists. Stephen's contribution to scientific research was typified by his enabling and co-ordination abilities to further the work of others rather than by data collection, analysis and publication of his own studies. His open, collaborative and highly social approach enabled many important research and conservation projects to be funded. Without the initial impetus provided by Stephen Sutton it is certain that knowledge of woodlice in Britain and Ireland would not have progressed as far as it has, and become a model for similar studies in other countries.

I am grateful to Terry Whitaker for helpful comments on a draft of this obituary and for additional references. Terry will be preparing obituaries covering other aspects of Stephen's life and research for publication elsewhere.

Paul T. Harding

S.L. Sutton's publications on woodlice and BMIG species

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