

## OBITUARY

### FREDERICK ARCHIBALD SOWTER 1899–1972

Frederick Archibald Sowter was born in Leicester on 30 August 1899, a city with which he was closely associated until his death there on 16 November 1972. His secondary-school education was obtained at the Wyggeston School, Leicester, where he was a pupil from 1909–1914. After leaving school he spent 2 years with a textile firm in Leicester in preparation for a business career. At an early age, however, he joined a Cadet Battalion and after a time at Bulwell Hall, Nottingham, and later at Keble College, Oxford, joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a 2nd Lieutenant. During World War I he served in France for a time and, after the war was over, spent a further year in Germany. On his return to Leicester he attended Nottingham University for a while to study textile chemistry and then joined the firm of Courtauld's Ltd. with which he remained until his early retirement in 1958 when he was their Assistant Sales Manager (Leicester Office).

His interest in natural history began at a very early age and was fostered by A. R. Horwood (b. 1879–d. 1937), who was sub-curator at Leicester City Museum from 1902 to 1922, and founded the Lichen Exchange Club in 1907 which ceased functioning in 1914. Horwood gathered a group of keen young men together who accompanied him on his field excursions in Leicestershire and who became known locally as 'Horwood's Boys'. In addition to F. A. Sowter this group included R. Stephen Creed, Tom M. Harris, George E. Mercer and Arthur E. Wade. F. A. Sowter later helped Horwood in the preparation of Horwood and Gainsborough's (1933) *Flora of Leicestershire and Rutland*, by collecting and listing flowering plants throughout these counties.

In the 1930s his interest in bryophytes quickened and he started to compile data for an account of the bryophytes of Leicestershire and Rutland which he published in 1941. He was editor of the *Transactions of the British Bryological Society* from its inception in 1947 until 1955 and elected President of that Society in 1958. He joined the Botanical Society of the British Isles in 1927 and published an account of *Arum maculatum* in the *Journal of Ecology* in 1949. During the visit of the British Association to Leicester in September 1933 he led a botanical excursion. Because his familiarity with Leicestershire plants extended over most of his life it is perhaps not surprising that he was able to draw attention to the disappearance of some interesting and rare species in a paper entitled 'Our diminishing flora' in 1960.

In 1944 he was elected to a Fellowship of the Linnean Society of London.

Having completed his major work on the bryophytes of Leicestershire and Rutland, in the early 1940s he directed his attention to the lichens of these two counties. This was a period at which lichenology in Britain was at its lowest ebb and when, as he often used to remark, those interested in British lichens could be counted on the fingers of one hand. In 1950 he completed his account of Leicestershire and Rutland lichens which was published for him by the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society. This comprehensive work was the first detailed account

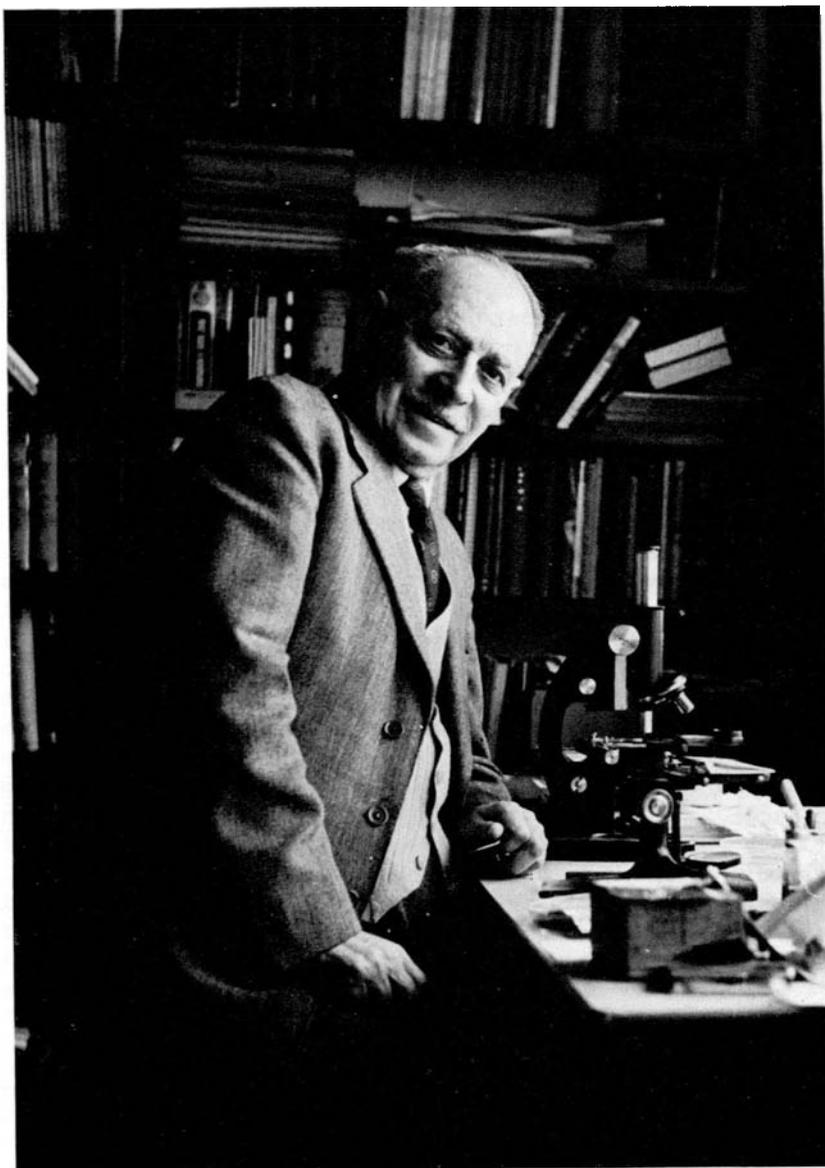
of the lichens of any British county to appear since Watson's treatment of the lichens of Somerset in 1930. In this flora he drew particular attention to man-made factors which had led to the extinction of some species in the counties. Of 331 species he accepted, at least thirty-one were reported to be extinct and he observed that 'The plants themselves often lack the freshness and development of similar species in the comparatively smoke-free atmosphere of the western districts of Great Britain.'

His lichenological interests were not confined to these two counties, however, and in the 1940s and early 1950s he travelled widely in Britain building up his collections and knowledge of British lichens. Few of the data from his visits to south Wales, Devonshire and Scotland have been published but he prepared an account of some of his Cumberland and Westmorland collections in 1945, and contributed data to the Collins New Naturalist volume on *The Peak District* published in 1962, my account of the lichens of Derbyshire published in 1969, and Rimington's section on lichens in *The Natural History of the Scarborough District* published in 1953. He also sent many specimens for determination or as new vice-county records to the late Dr Watson for inclusion in the *Census Catalogue of British Lichens* issued by Watson in 1953. His collections and notebooks constitute an extremely valuable source of records for a period when so little lichen recording was carried out in Britain.

Mr Sowter was always ready to assist others in determining specimens and his endless enthusiasm was a stimulus to many botanists beginning to study lichens for the first time. He was always keen to promote interest in this group of plants and to this end he started a 'Lichen Study Group' in January 1953 whose aim it was '... to assist its members in all branches of lichenology and especially to help members to see as much lichen material as possible.' Parcels of specimens were passed from one member to another and the effects this had are evidenced by the later work in this field of some of its eighteen members (e.g., U. K. Duncan, P. W. James, J. R. Laundon, G. Salisbury, G. D. Scott). The stimulus provided by the Lichen Study Group contributed at least in part to the foundation of the British Lichen Society on 1 February 1958. The assistance he rendered was recorded on p. 1 of the *Lichenologist* 1(1), 1958. Mr Sowter was unable to be present at the inaugural meeting of the Society but suggested the 'British Lichenological Society' as an alternative title by letter. He served on the Council of the Society from 1958–1960, acted as one of its panel of Referees from 1958–1964, and was elected as an honorary member of the Society on 2 January 1971.

While Professor C. T. Ingold was Professor of Botany at Leicester University (then University College, Leicester) in the 1940s and early 1950s, Mr Sowter, as a result of his stimulus, became interested in myxomycetes and published an account of the Leicestershire and Rutland species in 1958.

He was, although primarily a cryptogamist, keenly interested in all aspects of natural history acting as Secretary (1930–1951), Chairman (1954–1963), and latterly President (1964 onwards) of what is now the Natural History Section of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society. He also served on the Council of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society from 1933 until his death, and on the Museums, Libraries and Publicity Committee of Leicester City Council from July 1952. In his younger days he played tennis for Leicestershire and was sufficiently interested in philately to be made President of the Leicester Philatelic Society in 1937.



*F. A. Sowter*

FREDERICK ARCHIBALD SOWTER  
1899–1972

*(Facing p. 346)*



For the last 20 years of his life, however, he unfortunately suffered from a bronchial complaint which increasingly restricted his work in the field. During this period he kept up his interest in bryophytes and lichens through correspondence and the many botanists who came to see him at his home, 'Greenholme', 22 Stoughton Lane, Stoughton, Leicester. After a particularly bad period of illness in 1966 his health began to improve and he was once more able to take a more active interest in mosses and lichens. This gave him the opportunity to write a series of papers bringing his earlier work on the bryophytes and lichens of Leicestershire up to date and to do some more local fieldwork himself. He was also pleased to be able to meet many of the 'new people' in British lichenology in Charnwood Forest during the Society's Leicester Field Meeting on 1 November 1969.

The week before his death he was still actively working on mosses and lichens. He had virtually completed a revised list of the bryophytes of Malta and work on two nineteenth-century bryophyte collections recently acquired by Leicester City Museum, and was compiling data for a third paper in his series 'Leicestershire and Rutland cryptogamic notes' and sorting out his Devonshire lichen records for me.

His herbarium (c. 3500 lichens and 1500 bryophytes), notebooks and other documents relating to cryptogams have been left to Leicester City Museum (LSR) which already holds many early collections of Leicestershire cryptogams (by e.g., A. Bloxam, A. R. Horwood, H. P. Reader), while his extensive and valuable cryptogamic library has been divided between the libraries of the British Bryological Society and the British Lichen Society. His collections of Myxomycetes were presented to Leicester City Museum in 1957.

He leaves a widow, Mrs Marion G. Sowter (née Lewis), by his second marriage.

I first met Mr Sowter in the autumn of 1964 and owe a particular debt to him for nurturing my interest in lichens, assisting me in naming my early collections, and allowing me to make extensive use of his library whilst I was at Leicester University. To all those that were privileged to know him the memory of his endless enthusiasm and the enjoyment he obtained from looking at mosses and lichens will remain a constant source of encouragement and inspiration. It is with deep regret that we have to record the passing of one of the mainstays of British lichenology in the first half of the twentieth century in these pages.

I am very grateful to Mrs M. G. Sowter and Mr I. M. Evans for their assistance in the preparation of this note, and to the *Leicester Mercury* for the photograph of Mr Sowter reproduced here (taken in 1971).

*Botanical publications of F. A. Sowter*

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- Sowter, F. A. (1953) Book Review, *The tropical rain forest*. By P. W. Richards. *Trans. Br. bryol. Soc.* 2: 331.
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- Sowter, F. A. (1972b) Distribution maps of bryophytes in Britain, *Scleropodium touretii* (Brid.) L. F. Koch. *ŷ. Bryol.* 7: 95.
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*New names introduced by F. A. Sowter*

- Rhizocarpon geographicum* subsp. *prospectans* (Räs.) D. Hawksw. & Sowl., *Trans. Leicester lit. phil. Soc.* 63: 58 (1969). Syn. *R. prospectans* Räs.
- Tortula ovata* (Hedw.) H. N. Dixon in Sowter, *The cryptogamic flora of Leicestershire and Rutland, Bryophytes* (Leicester): 34 (1941). Syn. *Gymnostomum ovatum* Hedw.

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