

OBITUARY

**COLIN JOHNSON M.Sc., F.R.E.S.
30 April 1943–25 August 2021**

Keeper of Entomology at the Manchester Museum 1982–2003



Colin Johnson among the Manchester Museum cabinets in September 2004.

It is with immense sadness we report on the passing of Colin Johnson, the last Keeper of Entomology at the Manchester Museum. Known worldwide as an expert on beetles, particularly the Ptiliidae, Colin described an astonishing number of new taxa (405) in the Ptiliidae (196) and other families including Staphylinidae (2), Scarabaedidae (4), Byrrhidae (1), Anobiidae (5), Cryptophagidae (54), Endomychidae (2) and Latridiidae (129), his research occupying some 282 papers. In effect, each of his papers is a treasure trove providing a key to novel and related species enabling other entomologists worldwide to identify them. During his time at the Museum he developed techniques for dissection and mounting of these very small beetles (0.5–3mm), which previously were evaded by taxonomists as too difficult to study, techniques that with his humble, selfless and infectious enthusiasm he passed on to many other entomologists, directly by formal demonstration and indirectly through details in his many publications. Owing to his dedicated research,

a new generation of specialists on these small beetles is now emerging in America and Europe.

By many entomologists, colleagues, students and visitors to the Museum, Colin is known for a great deal more than for naming new species and his undoubted expertise as a beetle taxonomist: primarily for the welcoming, unerring generous help he has given to others, to anyone coming to the Museum searching for specimens and information, or those further afield requesting loans, making enquiries and/or needing help with identifications. He has been one of those invaluable but increasingly rare beings (an international entomological specialist) whose opinion has been continually sought on the identification and confirmation of problematic species, many of which have been sent to him but which has also included invitations to other museums at home and abroad, including Geneva (1976–93), Paris (1980), Lund and Copenhagen (1983), Basel (1985), Lyon (1985) and Berlin (1992). During his long career at the Museum, especially as Keeper, he has been responsible for giving formal and informal instruction to many others on the niceties of dissection and identification: undergraduate and graduate students in the University of Manchester and research students from other universities, again at home and abroad. His tutoring and direction extended to some 100 visitors a year. A number of these have become specialists in their own right, including Stanley Bowstead who became a leading authority on the family Corylophidae.

A vital part of Colin Johnson's work has been the curation of the collections and processing loans of specimens, work he has carried out with the trusty help of Phil Rispin, Mary Black and other volunteers. Between 1980 and July 2000 they processed some 32,459 loaned specimens. An essential part of Colin's work has been the accumulation and preparation of specimens for the cabinets, as well as acquiring additional storage. During his time at the Museum he has collected tens of thousands of beetles most of which he has mounted and added to the collections. Between April 1982 and July 2000 some 99,279 specimens were added to the collections. These he obtained during his own fieldwork abroad throughout Europe and by encouraging other collectors and museums to donate their collections and specimens to the Museum. The most important acquisition made by Colin seems to be the worldwide collection of rove-beetles (Staphylinidae) assembled by Horace Rupert Last (1908–1995). This collection consists of over 4,500 species being represented by some 30,000 specimens, of which 1047 are types (67 holotypes). Even more importantly, type specimens of many beetle species described by Colin were deposited in the Museum, hence increasing its scientific importance and international standing. Of the 405 species described by him, the holotypes of 53 are kept in the Manchester Museum; further 254 species are represented by paratypes. A complete catalogue of Colin's types is currently under preparation by the Museum staff.

In his everyday work, Colin always followed the high standards and working style set up by two of his great predecessors: Walter Douglas Hincks (1906–1961) and Alan Brindle (1915–2001), aiming to make the Museum's Entomology Department the finest reference and study centre in the North. Thanks to his enthusiasm and energy, the Manchester Museum became the third most important entomological depository after London's NHM and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. Personally, Colin re-curated and significantly extended the Museum's collection of British Coleoptera, from 180 drawers in 1962 to 306 by the time of his retirement, with 92% of coverage of the British fauna. He also re-curated

and supplemented the worldwide beetle collection of Hincks and Dibb (acquired 1948–1961) with material for more difficult families and groups of beetles (e.g., Staphylinioidea, Cucujoidea, Tenebrionoidea). At the same time he oversaw the computerisation of records of the entomological types (at that time, some 12,000 specimens representing over 2,300 species) and the accumulation of books for the entomological library. His most difficult task has been to contribute to the revamping (reconstruction) of the entire Museum, the Capital Development Project (CDP, 1998–2002) which accompanied an entirely new remit for the Museum, including new displays and a change to the museum role of Keepers. During CDP Colin had to change his office four times in ten months while overseeing the ‘decanting’ of collections and their restoration in new buildings. Coming at the end of his career it was, to put it mildly, a most difficult period of his professional life.

Colin was born in Ashton-under-Lyne and attended Hyde Grammar School, Hyde and Ashton-under-Lyne Technical Colleges. As a schoolboy, he first started to collect butterflies and moths, also reared caterpillars and pupae. Mr Alan Palmer, the Biology master at the Hyde Grammar School, strongly supported Colin’s entomological interests. In 1957/8, as a sixth-former, he attended a lecture given by W.D. Hincks, the Keeper of Entomology at the Manchester Museum, and as a result soon after joined the Manchester Entomological Society, one of many other entomological and natural history societies he joined later. During a brief period between 1959 and 1962 working as a laboratory assistant with Fletcher Miller Oil Company, his fascination and expertise with beetles was quickly recognised by fellow entomologists and he was employed as a technician in the Manchester Museum in 1962. In fact, at 18 years of age, he had already discovered his first beetle new to Britain (*Rhizophagus parvulus* near Glen Affric, Inverness-shire) before being employed by the Museum, the first of 67 species he added as new to the British list. In 1965 he already had responsibility as Assistant Leader on the British Schools Exploring Society Expedition to Arctic Norway. In 1967, Colin described his first beetle new to science, *Atomaria strandi* from Britain and Norway. From thence his lifelong contribution to our knowledge of beetles developed in the Museum, first as a technician in the Department of Entomology until 1972, then as Assistant Keeper to Alan Brindle (until 1982), and finally as Keeper of Entomology to his retirement in 2003. He became a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society the year he joined the Museum and obtained an MSc in 1978 by thesis, a masterly piece of work of 186 pages and 119 figures on ‘*The Biology of Ptiliidae in the Seychelles and Mascarene Islands.*’

During his career, Colin has been an active member of the Verrall Association of Entomologists, a member of the Editorial Board of the *Entomologist's Gazette*, *The Entomologist*, on the Board of Governors of *The Coleopterist*, a consultant to conservation bodies, a national recorder for atlases, and a contributor to the development of taxonomic lists and indicator taxa for special habitats. His work on saproxylic beetles associated with dead wood and tree fungi have led to key pasture-woodland sites being recognised for their conservation potential: for example, Sherwood Forest, Clumber Park, Calke Park, Kedleston Park, Chatsworth Park, Moccas Park, Powis Castle Park and Chirk Park. His work carried out at Dunham Massey Park from 1962 led to its recognition as the most important site in the Northwest for saproxylic beetles.

His standing in the World of Coleoptera is assured. His most prominent publication has formed part of the cataloguing of the whole of the Palaearctic

Coleoptera, an area extending from Ireland and Iceland to Japan and from Spitzbergen to North Africa and the Himalayas. Edited by Drs Aleš Smetana and Ivan Löbl, among the 50 to 60 specialists worldwide Colin has been the only British specialist authoring any families; he undertook the difficult Ptiliidae, Cryptophagidae and Latridiidae. On the national scale, Colin undertook a mammoth task of assembling all the available data on the Cryptophagidae (Atomariinae) of the British Isles, and published an Atlas in 1993. The respect that fellow researchers have had for him is clearly marked in the number of taxa named after him, 18 species, and his Honorary Membership of the Entomological Society of Helsinki.

Anyone unfamiliar with taxonomy inspecting these tiny creatures will wonder at the expertise it requires to identify and to describe new species of miniscule arthropods, an ability among entomologists – he felt as we do – we can ill afford to lose. Although many taxonomic studies now tend to increasingly adopt molecular techniques, a full appreciation of the biology of these tiny creatures is in danger of being lost without the expertise that Colin held so dear. Wherever he went, at home and abroad, his attention was never far from his beetles. His wife, Clare, often remarked how they would rarely achieve more than 100m on a walk before Colin was deep in the substrate, foliage and wood searching for his prey. The affection that he had for his family can be gauged by the fact that he named species after his wife (2 species) and two sons; two additional species were named after Clare by Michael Darby, based on the specimens of new species selected for description by Colin, because he was unable to describe them himself due to health problems. Clare not only fully supported Colin's entomological interests but also helped him with some essential works: e.g., in 1991 she compiled the entomological bibliography (in three parts, a total of 100 pages) of 33 entomologists, who had academic connections with the Manchester Museum.

Upon his retirement in 2003, Colin left a large working archive in the Museum. The archive contains 2117 items of several thousand pages retained in 18 boxes, mostly the extensive correspondence with colleagues worldwide, but also diaries and some other documents. The archive is sorted, catalogued and fully accessible to anyone willing to study it.

On a personal note my memory shall always be of his welcoming, cheerful readiness to help and encourage younger entomologists and his infectious sense of humour, his total dedication to his work, the Museum and his family. Once, when attending dinner at his home, I asked him, jokingly, if he ever gave any attention to beetles larger than a pinhead whereupon he produced, as if he had been expecting this quip, a large plastic bottle with its top neatly separated to form a lid occupied entirely by an enormous and distinctly intimidating *Cerambyx cerdo*. He had found it on a tree in Sorrento and while he and Clare found something large enough to contain it (after a search, a box of Amaretto biscuits the contents of which were decanted into a rucksack) the thoracic spines of the longhorn had penetrated both of Colin's fingers creating a flow of blood. That he held on was the measure of his tenacity and I was then entirely convinced he tackled larger beetles as well as small ones! However, I was left pondering how many Ptiliids fitted into one *Cerambyx cerdo*.

In 2009 Colin was diagnosed as having Huntington's Disease caused by a faulty gene. In his own extraordinary way he bore the inexorable advance of the disease uncomplainingly, no matter what indignity it threw in his way, always remaining positive and taking things just one day at a time. For this reason alone, but much

more, there is no doubt that Colin was a very special person, the ultimate professional scientist, to so many of us a wonderful and very remarkable personal friend. If the world was made up of Colin Johnsons we may feel assured it would be a much happier and contented world. Our thoughts and commiserations are with his wife Clare, his sons Andrew and Phil and his daughter-in-law Vanya over their deeply sad loss.

Species named after Colin Johnson (18):

Aphodius johnsoni Baraud, 1976 (Yugoslavia), Scarabaeidae.
Corticarina johnsoni Rucker, 1979 (Argentina), Latridiidae.
Euconus johnsoni Franz, 1980 (Brazil), Scydmaenidae.
Cryptophagus johnsoni Sen Gupta, 1980 (Nepal), Cryptophagidae.
Holoparamecus johnsoni Rucker, 1981 (Brazil), Merophysiidae.
Agathidium johnsoni Angelini & De Marzo, 1982 (Nepal), Leiodidae.
Diaphorocera johnsoni Kaszab, 1983 (Saudi Arabia), Meloidae.
Ptinella johnsoni Rutanen, 1985 (Finland), Ptiliidae.
Odochilus johnsoni Rakovič, 1989 (Philippines), Scarabaeidae.
Amphicrossus johnsoni Kirejtshuk, 1994 (Ethiopia), Nitidulidae.
Microphagus johnsoni Leschen, 1996 (Ecuador), Cryptophagidae.
Euparixoides johnsoni Stebnicka, 1998 (Brazil), Scarabaeidae.
Cassida johnsoni Borowiec, 1998 (Madagascar), Chrysomelidae.
Monotoma johnsoni Bousquet & Laplante, 1999 (USA, Portugal, Ethiopia, Australia), Rhizophagidae.
Cossyphus (Acontodactylus) johnsoni Scupola, 2000 (Ethiopia), Tenebrionidae.
Corticaria johnsonii Mariño, López & Otero, 2007 (Spain), Latridiidae.
Acrotichis colini Darby, 2014 (Malagasy), Ptiliidae.
Notoptenidium johnsoni Darby, 2018 (New Zealand), Ptiliidae.

Species named after Colin Johnson's family (6):

Corticarina clareae Johnson, 1972 (N. India), Latridiidae.
Metopthalmus clareae Johnson, 1973 (Rhodesia), Latridiidae.
Migneauxia phili Johnson, 2007 (Spain, Morocco), Latridiidae.
Melanophthalma andrewi Rucker & Johnson, 2007 (Corsica), Latridiidae.
Acrotichis clareae Darby, 2014 (Malagasy), Ptiliidae.
Cissidium clareae Darby, 2020 (Solomon Islands), Ptiliidae.

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ROGER L.H. DENNIS