

John Alan Murphy (1922–2021)

It is a measure of the man that within a day of notifying just a few fellow arachnologists of John's death, I received a small avalanche of messages from all corners of the world.

John's childhood was spent on a small country estate on the outskirts of Trowbridge where his father maintained the walled cottage garden, looked after the horse and carriage, and eventually graduated to driving the owners (cloth mill proprietors) in their car. John always said how idyllic this was, being surrounded by chalk grassland with its orchids and butterflies, and wandering freely in the grounds. This was where his interest in the natural world was aroused.

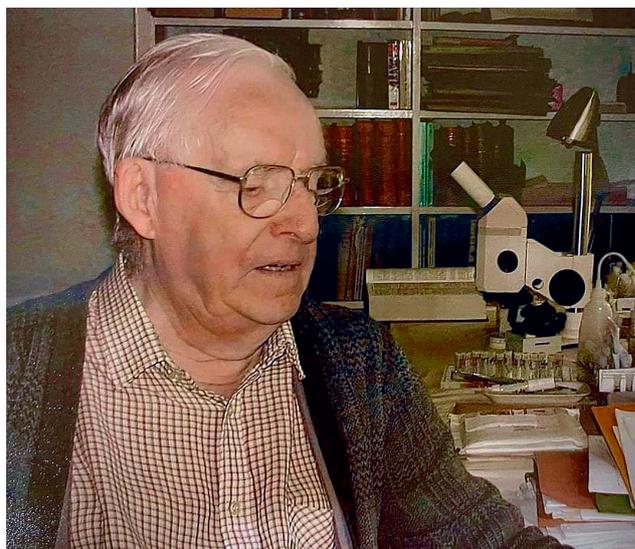
His talent for mathematics was nurtured by a very sympathetic school master at his Trowbridge school which then led him to Bristol University to study for a mathematics degree. This was interrupted by the war when he had to do National Service. His mathematical skills were used, among other things, to pinpoint bombing targets. He told of occasions when he had to communicate target information to pilots in the air over Germany. After the war he resumed his studies and eventually obtained his degree. In the following years he worked for Fairey Aviation which is where he first met Frances, who was later to become his wife. He was introduced to a young woman, a fellow mathematician, to whom he made a silly remark about women and maths (a rare thing in those days). He was fixed by such a withering look and caustic comment that he said to himself "this is the woman for me".

After some years at Fairey Aviation he took up a post lecturing in mathematics at Brunel University where he made long-lasting friendships with other mathematics lecturers. They were all housed on the top floor of a building which meant John could bother them when he had no work to do, having got through his tasks at breakneck speed. His jovial interruptions were not always welcome, but he certainly had a great talent to amuse.

It was during this time that Frances first read Bill Bristowe's New Naturalist book *The World of Spiders*. Her interest in spiders seemed to have been ignited by this so she went out, bought a camera, and quite rapidly became a very proficient photographer.

During much of this period nearly all of John's spare time was taken up by playing cricket, a sport that he loved and which he played for some 45 years. However, on telling Frances that an injury was forcing him to retire she replied "Excellent! You can do something useful at last!". So began a wonderful partnership that travelled much of the world until Frances's untimely death in 1995. During that time, they built up a massive worldwide spider collection totalling over 45,000 specimens, which was donated in 2015 to the Manchester University Museum. Along the way, they also built a huge circle of friends which included most of the great and good of Arachnology at the time.

They travelled to South-East Asia many times, being fascinated by the diversity of the spider fauna and amazed at the paucity of information available. Accordingly, they had discussed the possibility of jointly writing *An Introduction*



to the Spiders of South-East Asia. Sadly, Frances had completed only a few pages of the first draft of this before her death. Luckily, John agreed to finish the book using many of the photographs taken by Frances, and it was published by the Malaysian Nature Society in 2000.

Following the death of Frances, John still travelled but rather less. He attended various British, European, and International conferences where he seemed to know everyone, and also made collecting trips to Australia with his old friend Christa Deeleman-Reinhold, and to Malaysia with Martin Askins. His home remained a friendly port of call close to Heathrow airport for many visiting arachnologists where you could rely on an interesting debate, a glass of good wine and a good laugh.

Over the following years, John continued to work on spiders with various arachnologists from both this country and abroad and, in particular, with Mike Roberts. Their collaboration was recognised when, in 2015, John was the recipient of the Brignoli award of the International Society for Arachnology which is given for a single piece or body of outstanding work. The work in question was the two-volume book *Gnaphosid Genera of the World*, with illustrations by Michael Roberts, published in 2007 to many plaudits. A final major work, published in 2015 was the two-volume *Spider Families of the World and their Spinnerets*. During the later stages of writing the book, John's health began to fail, and fairly soon he was diagnosed with early-stage dementia. It soon became evident that he should not be living alone. Luckily, he was in a position to employ a residential carer which meant that he could continue to stay in the home that he had shared with Frances all their married lives.

Even with declining health, he remained in remarkably good spirits and was usually up for a joke, although he no longer recognised any of his old friends, most of his memories being of his earliest days and of his dear Frances. Late in January John had a fall, probably caused by a stroke, and was taken to hospital where he died on the 28th of January, just a few days short of his 99th birthday.

Rowley Snazell

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