

Obituary

Susan Bourne 1950–2020 A personal memory

The untimely death of Susan Bourne in October 2020 is yet a further sad passing amongst those who were the founders of the Regional Furniture Society and who brought so much enterprise and enthusiasm to the Society's formative years. Susan came to the forefront of the Society as its first Secretary, a post which she held for several years at a time when there was much discussion about the direction that the Society should take to develop membership, to provide an interesting programme of events, and importantly to offer guidance in research methods especially tailored to the Society's primary aim of recording the regional traditions of furniture making and local designs throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland.

We began this ambitious task by organizing the first event at the Bodleian Library in Oxford where the Head Librarian, whose interest lay in early pianos, helped us to hire the Curators' rooms for our first two-day event on research methods. Lectures in taking oral histories, using the resources of the central libraries in creating local databases of makers, identifying indigenous furniture woods, and many other aspects of our work were crammed into those two days. This was followed a little later by organizing a conference with the Vernacular Architecture Society at Exeter College, Oxford, to explore the relationship between architectural space and the furniture which was made for it in the different regions of Britain. In these early stages of the Society's development, Sue was at the forefront of organizing the administration and co-ordination of the Society's events, a role for which she was ideally placed by her background in museums, firstly working under the direction of the late Christopher Gilbert of Temple Newsam House, Leeds, our first Editor, and it was he who encouraged Susan to become Secretary of the infant society under Bill Cotton's Chairmanship. Later in her career, she became a Curator and ultimately Director of Towneley Hall Museum, in Burnley, Lancashire where she worked until her retirement, becoming instrumental in expanding the existing collection of seventeenth-century furniture, mainly bought from leading dealers. It is today one of the premier places to explore this aspect of regional furniture.

This formative relationship with us continued until the sudden end of her life last month, although after her retirement in 2010 she engaged more fully in her other life-long interests, especially gardening at her cottages in the Lake District and Burleydam in Shropshire where she lived with her partner, Eric Smith. Typically, she developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Latin names of plants, which she swapped with my wife, Gerry, also a dedicated gardener. On one occasion we travelled together to France to visit the many grand chateaux gardens, including Monet's famed creation, and where furniture naturally became of secondary



During the RFS Romania study tour in September 2012.
Photo Jeremy Bate

interest. She returned to Shropshire and planned her parterre garden there.

She loved visiting country houses and gardens too, often with her close friend Moira Stevenson who had been Director at the Macclesfield Museum. Sue's knowledge of these places of interest as well as the Arts in general, made her an ideal companion for those of us similarly inclined. Her annual visits with Eric to the Cotswolds were full of fun and often dark humour as we visited Arts and Crafts inspired houses and the lovely villages and churches in the Cotswold valleys, and sometimes we diverted to collect edible fungi to make our evening meal! Conversation flowed endlessly and effortlessly! Foreign travel, too, was another of her great passions, and her visits to Europe's great museums usually yielded postcards showing vernacular furniture from other countries.

The photograph of Susan included here, taken on a visit to Romania with the RFS, really encapsulates her sense of humour and adventure, and those who knew her will remember these two over-riding aspects of her personality. Life will be the poorer for her passing, and a great personal loss to those who knew her well. But the Society will always owe much to the building blocks which she helped to put in place in her years following the Society's foundation.

Bill and Gerry Cotton