

John Buxton 1927 – 2014

John Buxton, who died at his home of Horsey Hall, Norfolk, on 11th January 2014, was the central character in the protection of Common Cranes *Grus grus* on their return as a British breeding bird. He was the Cranes' guardian for more than three decades, was an accomplished wildlife film-maker and made a great contribution to protecting wildlife in his corner of the Broads.



Conservation runs in the family. In 1903, John's grandfather Edward North Buxton was a founder member of Fauna and Flora International, formerly the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society. John Joseph Buxton was born in Geneva in 1927 as his father, Anthony Buxton, worked there for the League of Nations. Disenchanted, Anthony Buxton left Switzerland and bought the Horsey Estate in 1930. John's first memory of Horsey was as a four year old where, he later recalled, the water and the reedbeds always fascinated him. Major Anthony Buxton's commitment to protecting the Horsey Estate led him to pass the freehold to the National Trust. The arrangement was for the Buxton family to manage the estate on a 99-year lease, which continues.

As a child, John saw damage to the Horsey area when the sea broke through in 1938, when the impact was worse than in the floods of 1953.

After three years with the army in post-war Germany, he was trained in agricultural management, spending time on a relative's farm in Suffolk and in Canada. Taking over the estate's management in 1958, it became his life's work to manage and protect the area's freshwater marshes. Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* and Eurasian Bitterns *Botaurus stellaris* returned to breed.

John made films for Anglia's Survival series after he was asked – at three days' notice – by Aubrey, later Lord Buxton, to fly to Uganda to make a programme about white rhinos. Further overseas projects followed. In 1965 John made two wildlife documentaries for the RSPB about the Norfolk broads: 'Broadland Winter' and 'Broadland Summer'. Later he filmed 'his' Cranes, and this wonderful archive footage features in recent Crane films.

In September 1979, a local farmer phoned John to report, "The biggest bloody Herons I have seen in my life." John suspected they might be Cranes, as they had moved through the area before, and so it proved. This time they stayed, albeit leaving for short periods. The first nesting attempt was in 1981, when one chick hatched but was lost to an unknown predator. They nested again in 1982 and this time fledged one young – the first Crane to be fledged in the UK for some 400 years.

The Cranes arrived as immature birds and Horsey's coastal location, mix of reed and sedge beds, grazing marsh and arable played a part in attracting the birds and tempting them to stay and nest. Another crucial factor was that Horsey was remarkably free from disturbance by people. This, and the fear of egg-collectors, meant John was zealous in maintaining privacy for the Cranes' first decade there. Many birdwatchers will recall being firmly steered away. Glen Tyler, carrying out Bittern research, was one of these, when John caught him canoeing along a ditch at about 04:30. Yet I've never met anyone who holds a grudge on account of being asked to leave, based as it was on a passion to protect Cranes. Indeed John was the perfect gentleman to anyone who got to know him.

Crane protection in the early years was shared between John, wardens from the Horsey Estate and, for ten years, a seasonal warden employed by the RSPB. The wardens mostly stayed at Horsey Hall: John's wife Bridget shared his enthusiasm, and her hospitality was vital for many who visited or stayed.

RSPB involvement was at arm's length, which suited both the Society and John. He had a slightly ambivalent view of the RSPB: quick to make friends with individual staff members,



including me, but a little suspicious of the Society's size and influence. John was relieved that that the Great Crane Project reintroducing captive-bred Cranes was in Somerset, well away from his own great Crane project in Norfolk, but he quite understood how Sir Peter Scott's Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust should be enthusiastic to see Cranes return. One of John favourite mementos was a sketch of the 'Grey birds' made when Sir Peter, with Lady Phillipa Scott, came to see the Horsey Cranes in 1985.

Secrecy was top priority in the early years of the Cranes at Horsey,

though in reality these large and noisy birds were never the best kept secret. Rumours that one or more had escaped from collections helped to reduce birdwatcher interest, rumours that John did not discourage. In hindsight, it is clear that the Norfolk re-colonisation was part of a westward spread into areas from which they'd been lost in historical times. Cranes bred away from Horsey for the first time in 2001, then at nearby Hickling in 2003 and in Yorkshire and at RSPB Lakenheath Fen soon after. This encouraged John to be relaxed about publicity and he became keen to tell their story.

Sometimes ramshackle hides overlooking nesting areas were a great asset for protecting and observing the Cranes. John kept notebooks and the detailed, contemporary accounts of the Cranes' activities and behaviour were invaluable when he and I wrote *The Norfolk Cranes' Story*, published in 2011.

John was a deputy lieutenant of Norfolk and was made an MBE for services to conservation in 2007.

John and Bridget remained great travellers, going annually to Scotland and regularly to Norway. His enthusiasm for wildlife never dimmed: he would twinkle like a schoolboy naturalist when talking about the progress of some captive Swallowtail larvae. Countless people have fond memories as guests of John and Bridget to see Cranes, to look over the private 'scrape' at Horsey or see Pink-footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus* fly to roost.



This affection was evident when some 500 people, including a large and loving family, gathered at Winterton-on-Sea church to celebrate his life.

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