

John Phillips

1930 – 2019

John died unexpectedly at his home on the 28th December 2019. It was a great shock and sadness for all his family and friends. His wife, Paddy, had died only four months earlier in August.

John was born in Bangor, Co. Down on the 12th June 1930 and was the only child of Reggie and Mary Phillips. He was educated at Bangor Grammar School. His favourite subjects were Physics and Mathematics and he made arrangements to study these subjects at Queens University, Belfast. However, he was awarded a valuable scholarship by the Ministry of Agriculture to study Forestry at Aberdeen University, which he accepted. He graduated three years later in 1951 with a B.Sc. (Hons).



He joined the Forestry Division of the Ministry and his first postings were to Glenarm and Randalstown Forests in Co. Antrim. His next posting was in Co. Fermanagh as District Officer. When he heard the news, he said to a friend “Where is that?” The directions given were “Take the road to Portadown and keep going!”

The 1950s and 1960s were busy times for the Service as funds were available for purchase of large areas of marginal land for afforestation. John was very committed to ensure our state forests should be managed for multiple uses, and serve recreation, conservation and education, rather than just for timber production. To reduce unemployment in rural areas a “Relief Scheme” was introduced. This was mainly used to develop recreational facilities in forests. This was very popular with the public and a number of Forest Parks were developed.

John married Paddy in 1954 and at one time they lived in a bungalow at Killadeas with fine views of Lough Erne. Their two sons, Steven and Gary, were born in Enniskillen. John was a very keen sailor and he had a Fairy Class yacht which he sailed in competitions at Lough Erne Yacht Club. He served as Commodore and was also honoured to be appointed Admiral of the Club. His other passion was a love of nature. He was a very keen and knowledgeable naturalist, with a particular interest in bird life and was a keen supporter of the RSPB. John was also a keen Member of the Society of Irish Foresters and served as President from 1981-1983. He was also a member of the Royal Forestry Society.

John was promoted to Regional Forest Officer West and served in this position in the 1960s and 1970s. His office was in Omagh and his Region included all forests in the western half of Northern Ireland. In 1981 John was transferred to Forest Service

headquarters in Belfast and I know that he left Fermanagh with a very heavy heart as he had fallen under the spell of its lakes and wildlife. However, in 1983 he was promoted to Chief Forest Officer to replace Cecil Kilpatrick who had retired. Just two years later he was head hunted for the newly created post of Director of Conservation in the Department of the Environment. During his years in Fermanagh John had been Chairman of the Lough Erne Advisory Committee, a member of the Nature Reserves Committee and a council member of the Ulster Trust for Nature Conservation. This background enabled him to lay strong foundations in his new post and to develop a very professional and sustainable Conservation Service within the Government. He also had the talent to inspire and encourage his staff. John retired in the early 1990s.

John enjoyed an active retirement. He continued sailing on Lough Erne as he kept a caravan at the Yacht Club. He also retained his membership of the Belfast Naturalists Field Club and the Botanical Society of the British Isles.

It is obvious that John had a rich and varied life and career. He also had a quiet, unassuming nature and was one of life's gentlemen. He will not be forgotten by all those who enjoyed his friendship. To his sons, Steven and Gary, and to his four grandchildren, we offer our sincere sympathy.

Bill Wright