

Professor Harry John Betteley BIRKS

Written and read by Professor Des Thompson on 16th May 2016

Professor John Birks is a remarkably talented and prolific scientist, and is internationally acclaimed for his work. Over a career based first in Cambridge, and from 1984 in Bergen, Norway, John has transformed palaeoecology from a largely descriptive to a rigorously quantitative science relevant to present-day questions in ecology and environmental change. Essentially, John has dedicated himself to unraveling the post-glacial history and development of plantlife. In doing so, he has pioneered techniques relying on the identification of plant remains in core samples of soil and lake sediments in order to reconstruct and understand the impacts of natural processes and human activities on terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems.

Taking a First in Botany at Cambridge in 1966, John remained there to study, for his PhD, the vegetation of the Isle of Skye. Even as a schoolboy he published scientific papers, and it came as no surprise to his peers that he went on to be ranked the sixth most-cited geoscientist world-wide at the turn of millennium. He has published more than 20 books and 400 refereed publications, has editorial roles for nine scientific journals, and last year had a special issue of the scientific journal *The Holocene* dedicated to his lifetime work - entitled 'At the frontiers of palaeoecology'.

Recently, he was elected Foreign Member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, and of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. He has received prestigious

medals for his research from four countries, as well as the Lifetime Achievement Award and Medal from the International Paleolimnology Association, in 2012.

Furthermore, John has made signal contributions to documenting and understanding the modern flora (including bryophytes) and habitats of Britain (helping devise the National Vegetation Classification), and of Scandinavia, Yukon, Tibet and the Himalaya, as well as many mountain areas in the Americas, Africa, central Europe, and Australasia. Beyond exceptional field skills in plant identification, he has adapted and devised key numerical approaches to test critical hypotheses in plant geography. He is the quintessential polymath, but grounded in an intense enjoyment of unravelling the rich tapestry of plantlife.

Throughout his career, John has worked closely with his wife Hilary – an exceptional scientist in her own right. They are a formidable team, with a wide network of friends and co-workers. But do not be deceived into thinking that John is grounded in the sophistry of science. Far from it – he is devoted to their two granddaughters, has one of Europe's largest private CD collections of baroque music, and in his spare time pursues his fascination for books on espionage, which are housed in a substantial library.

Kindly supportive of students and indeed anyone curious about nature, he has profoundly influenced the career trajectories of hundreds of people, and sustains a global network of correspondents and collaborators.

For his exceptional commitment to the advancement of the natural sciences, and for his unstinting support of field research and quantitative ecology, the Society is honored to admit Professor John Birks as a Corresponding Fellow today.

Reply by *John Birks*

President, Fellows, Professor Thompson, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

I am greatly honoured to being elected a Corresponding Fellow of your Society. It is most appropriate to be here in Edinburgh today as it was very nearly 50 years ago (June 10th 1966 to be precise) that Hilary Lees (now Hilary Birks), John Dransfield, a student colleague, and I started our first field-work season in Scotland. We were in the field for 10 weeks, sampling peats and lakes in Galloway, the Cairngorms, on Skye, and in the North-West Highlands for pollen analysis, collecting vegetation data, exploring the flora of the Scottish Highlands, and collecting mosses and liverworts. We found two species new to Britain that summer - beginner's luck! I returned to Scotland for field work almost every year until we moved to Norway in 1984. Our work in Scotland was greatly inspired and influenced by our close friend, the late Derek Ratcliffe and later by Des Thompson. I am extremely grateful to the Royal Society of Edinburgh for this honour - thank you.