

## Dr Irene Ridge 1942–2025: an obituary



Fig. 1. Irene Ridge at the North West Fungus Group residential foray in Keswick, 2018. Photo © Paul F. Hamlyn.

Irene was born in Clitheroe in 1942. Following a secondary education at Clitheroe Royal Grammar School, she went up to Somerville College, Oxford in 1961 where she studied Botany, Biochemistry and Zoology. It was whilst at Oxford that she met her husband, John. In addition to being a dedicated and enthusiastic scholar, Irene joined the Queen's College dramatic society where she was able to show how accomplished an actor she was. After graduating with a prestigious first class honours degree in Botany and obtaining a PhD, she secured a position in the early seventies with the Open University, lecturing in Biology.

Although Irene remained with the OU until she retired in 2002, by the nineties she had moved with John back to Lancashire. Irene commuted weekly to Milton Keynes, but nevertheless threw herself into local life. In 1990 she became honorary reserve manager for the Salthill and Crosshills Quarries in Clitheroe. Irene also joined North West Fungus Group (NWFG) not long after it was founded by Rita Cook in 1994. In 2004 she became its Chair and remained so until 2021, an amazing 17 years piloting the group. At the end of the 90s she began volunteering with Lancashire Wildlife Trust (LWT), assisting in practical conservation tasks at Moor Piece Nature Reserve. Irene took the opportunity to record the fungi she found and, over the years, led NWFG on a number of recording forays there. She and John also bought an adjacent piece of land to extend the area of the reserve. In 2018 LWT awarded Irene a long-service volunteering certificate. In 2003 Irene became a magistrate and eventually chaired the local bench.

Irene was a scientist and a teacher. I believe that's why the fungal kingdom was of such interest to her. Its complexity, beauty, identification challenges and need for its value to be more widely appreciated, enabled Irene to channel both of those great strengths into what was an enduring commitment to field mycology. When asked recently when she became interested in fungi, she said she couldn't really remember, but thought it might have started when she was a teenager. A close friend of Irene's since college days, Dr Marlene Behennah, remembers several holidays in the South West which included fungal foraging.

Irene was a firm believer in sharing her knowledge of fungi. Indeed at the NWFG's 30th AGM in 2024 she said, "Spreading the word about fungi is an important part of the justification for NWFG — as well as enjoying and learning about them ourselves". For many years, doing just that, Irene led numerous guided forays for the general public and gave talks to local natural history and conservation groups. She also invested much time and effort in the development of new field mycologists and conservation volunteers through microscope workshops, identification courses and mentoring. During the pandemic she even led a Zoom session on identifying *Mycena* species. Having become something of an expert in the Geoglossaceae, she sought to share that expertise too through the development of a guide for beginners which included a key that is still in use, in an updated form, today.

Irene was a long-standing member of the British Mycological Society and regularly attended the annual week-long residential forays. She participated in the BMS waxcap grassland project in 1996, her own site subsequently being rated amongst the top 12 in the country at the time. When the BMS inaugurated UK Fungus Day (UKFD), she was keen that we supported it and so began our ongoing NWFG commitment to this event. In 2021 Irene exchanged her role as Chair for one as Education & Outreach Officer and organised several successful UKFD family events at Mere Sands Wood, an LWT reserve.

Irene has left behind a group of capable field mycologists in NWFG. Following her example, we will continue recording species, developing new mycologists and spreading the word about the value of the fungal kingdom whenever possible. Irene has also left a significant collection of fungal records and vouchers, which will be available to conservationists, taxonomists and other researchers long into the future.

Irene was held in high esteem and warm regard in NWFG. Her kindness, good humour, patience and extensive knowledge of fungi will be greatly missed by ourselves, and by many others in the wider Mycology community who also knew her.

Jeanette Maddy, North West Fungus Group