

OBITUARIES

Charles Cobbett Barker, BSc, PhD
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Charles came up to Bristol in 1935 to read Chemistry. He graduated with first class honours in 1938 and was awarded a PhD in 1941. He then went to work in the dyestuffs Division of ICI, first at Blackley, in Manchester and then at Huddersfield. Some of his wartime work involved explosives. In 1947 he returned to Bristol to pursue an academic career. He spent a year as a post-doctoral research fellow and in 1948 he moved to the Chemistry department at University College, Hull, later to become Hull University. His wide-ranging research output grew from his interest in and past experience of colour chemistry. Much of it involved the synthesis and study of compounds that could be used in the production of dyes. He remained at Hull for the rest of his academic career, being appointed a Senior Lecturer in 1962. He suffered a serious illness in the 1960s that led to the removal of his spleen. He made a good recovery. He retired in 1982. In retirement, he and his wife Margaret moved to Charlton Kings, near Cheltenham. Margaret was a botanist and Charles had read botany as a second subject for his degree. They got much pleasure from cultivating their garden with its views of the Cotswolds

Charles had joined the Society as an undergraduate. Caving became one of the great enthusiasms of his earlier years and his efforts had a big influence on the Society. He was a pioneer in two of our longest running activities, digging in GB and exploring caves in Co. Clare. Members had investigated the area around the present entrance to GB Cave for many years in the 1920s and 30s. Read's Grotto had been discovered but little else. In 1939 a small group, which included Francis Goddard and Charles, decided to excavate in a previously unnoticed depression. It was a classic Mendip dig. They had to work their way through narrow rifts blocked by mud, gravel, rubble and large boulders. After six months of laborious work, the Upper Series of GB was entered. The persistence and energy that Francis and Charles had

displayed led to the cave being named GB in recognition of their efforts. Some of the large boulders in the dig had needed blasting and this led to another of Charles's enthusiasms that influenced his career.

Charles's chemical skills made some useful contributions to the Society. The Museum was seriously damaged in an air raid in 1940. Many of the specimens that survived, were flint tools that were originally white. The fire had baked carbon on to their surfaces and blackened them. When asked by Desmond Donovan, who had become the curator after the war, if there was a chemical solution to the problem of cleaning them, Charles devised a way of using boiling, concentrated nitric acid to oxidise the carbon. This was both ingenious and successful. The discoloured specimens were restored to their pre-war whiteness without damaging them in other ways. At the same time he brought back to the Society his blasting skills, enhanced now by his professional involvement with explosives during the war. Equally importantly, some of those useful chemicals came with him. They were used in excavations at the bottom of GB and in Rhino Rift, when commercial explosives were unobtainable. He experimented with home made, focused charges for blasting rocks and felling trees. The charges were literally 'home made'. He melted the TNT/RDX in a saucepan on his mother's gas stove and cast the charges in the kitchen. He also had a motor-bike, something that most student members could not afford in those penurious post-war years. Many caving trips were made with a passenger on the pillion, laden down with equipment that included bulky ropes made of hemp. The ex-army Lee Enfield served us well until Charles swerved to avoid a dog at Charterhouse and fractured his skull. The injury affected his eyesight later in life.

In the late 1940s Charles developed a new enthusiasm. He read the account by Coleman and Dunnington, of the Pollnagollum Cave in Ireland and in 1948 he, and three other members, joined the two Irish cavers for some further exploration in the cave. He was fascinated by the Burren, the great area of limestone karst in Co. Clare. This visit was the first by a party from the UBSS. Every year since then, a similar party has visited the area.

Charles, however, played no further part in these expeditions. Two things changed in his life. His career took him away from Bristol, and romance gave him yet another, and far more important, enthusiasm. He married Margaret in 1950 and they raised a family. He gave up sporting caving but, with Margaret, continued to pursue his interest in karst topography. Starting with visits to the Burren, and then to Lascaux on their honeymoon, their interests took them to many of the limestone regions of Western Europe. But he never lost his love for the Mendips. He took his three sons there camping on holiday for many years and visited old friends like Bertie and Marjorie Crook and Molly Hall.

Inevitably, given Charles's liking for food, his early visits to France led to a taste for the food and wine of the country. As all good chemists should, Charles became a good cook.

Charles was first of all a family man. Secondly, he was a teacher. The Universities Funding Council awarded his department an 'Excellent' rating for teaching. He was a very good organic chemist and an excellent supervisor of research students. He is remembered at Hull today as being 'a good teacher, and quite a character'. I can vouch for both judgements. He was certainly the latter. His views were unconventional but always thought through with rigour and expressed with clarity. He was insatiably curious about the world. He had a keen eye for human folly and described it with a wit that was both dry and pungent. He was a delightful companion on a caving expedition. As for teaching, I had no involvement in his academic life, but he taught me three important things: the value of scepticism, the need for objectivity, and how to blow things up.

J.K. Pitts