

Michael John Roberts (1945–2020)

Mike, as he was known to all his friends and colleagues, was born in Leicester. His mother, Marjory Embury, was an artist who encouraged the development of his exceptional observational and technical skills using a wide range of artistic media. He had an early interest in natural history, but it was during his medical studies at Sheffield University Medical School that this became more focussed and he took on the challenge of studying and illustrating spiders. The standard texts at the time were the Ray Society volumes on *British Spiders*, by Ted Locket and Frank Millidge (L&M), who later became Mike's mentors. Mike clearly felt that he could improve on the standard of the available illustration of both genitalia and whole body images and thereby ease the way for the novice, who may have struggled to find a way through the identification keys of L&M. He also recognised the advantages of spider illustrations at greater than life size.

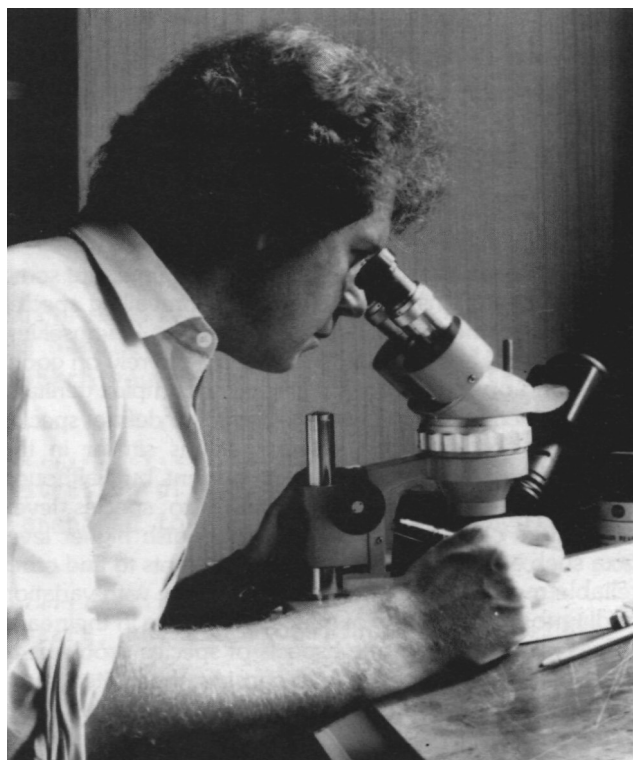
In March 1968, while resident at Eccleshall Road in Sheffield, we find Mr M. J. Roberts being admitted to membership of the British Spider Study Group, at its Annual Meeting at Monkwood near Huntingdon. This was the successor organisation to the Flatford Mill Spider Study Group and then became the British Arachnological Society (BAS). In the same year, Mike graduated from his medical studies and started his career as a General Practitioner.

By this time, he had honed his illustration methodology and technique and produced the first of his characteristic larger than life colour illustrations. This became plate 131 (*Pachygnatha clerki*) in volume 3 of his *Spiders of Great Britain and Ireland*. In the preface to this volume, he commented that “as a young naturalist I always thought it a great pleasure, almost adventure, to find a plant or animal in the field and then go home and find an illustration and description of it in a book. There is a real sense of someone ‘having been there before’ and, in an otherwise rapidly changing world, these small things can sometimes give a sense of stability.”

Mike's first publication on spiders was in 1969 with some observations on the food scavenging of *Entelecara erythropus* in the webs of *Amaurobius similis*. This was published in the fledgling *Bulletin of the British Arachnological Society* (1: 63), now *Arachnology*.

Mike and his first family spent the early to mid-1970s in Buckley, Flintshire. As a GP, he is remembered by former patients for the spider pictures in his surgery! One wonders if he treated arachnophobes? At the time, as well as carrying out local surveys, he was also working on spider specimens from various Royal Society expeditions to the Indian Ocean. He finally published papers on these spiders from the Seychelles and the Aldabra Atoll in 1978–9. Clearly an achiever, he was elected to the Council of the BAS and served, almost continuously, from 1973–1985.

By the late 1970s, now back in Sheffield, he was producing more full-colour illustration, using inks, and considering the possibility of publication. He is remembered as having a stall at the Wigan Insect Show, advertising his natural his-



tory illustration skills. While in Sheffield, he was establishing a successful medical practice and developing an interest in using acupuncture as a treatment for various ailments. Indeed, at least one BAS member had their ‘arachnologist’s knee’ successfully treated. His receptionist, Debbie, became his second wife and, together, they wrote the spider chapter in *The Natural History of the Sheffield Area and the Peak District*.

Mike was enthusiastic about encouraging people to develop an interest in spiders and was generous with his time. He ran local spider field outings to places around Sheffield such as Sherwood Forest Country Park. The group would return to his converted basement for identification sessions. Indeed, he was keen to promote a UK network of spider groups which would help collect data for the planned spider distribution atlas.

The spider illustration project finally came to fruition when Basil Harley of Harley Books agreed to publish *The Spiders of Great Britain and Ireland*. This three-volume work came out in two phases: volume 1, covering all families except Linyphiidae, and volume 3, the colour plates, were published in 1985. Volume 2, dealing with the Linyphiidae, was published in 1987. Mike later discovered that another publisher, who had rejected the opportunity, subsequently entered it in a trade magazine competition for the Oddest Publisher’s Reject, not realising it had already achieved success! That tickled Mike. During this time, Mike was elected to the position of Honorary Secretary of the BAS, which he held from 1986 until 1997.

The mid 1980s are remembered fondly by arachnologists for a number of Mike Roberts-led field meetings at places like Losehill Hall near Castleton in Derbyshire, and the late, lamented, Kindrogan Field Centre in Perthshire. His new book had generated huge interest, both in attending these

courses and in recording spider distribution. His volume on the Linyphiidae was a particular success, demystifying what had previously been seen as a difficult group.

The field courses were great fun, but very hard work, with Mike insisting all specimens be identified before bed. Some participants were still at it before breakfast! During the Losehill Hall course, a local TV film crew recorded activities in the field and laboratory for later broadcast, but underestimated how far they had to lug their gear up Lathkill Dale to film arachnologists in action! Back in the laboratory, they witnessed the first Derbyshire record of *Pholcus phalangoides*—in the men's room! The concentration at these courses was intense and, after one long period of silence, a frustrated student of *Lepthyphantes* exclaimed “not another bloody zimbo!” (*L. zimmermanni*, now *Tenuiphantes zimmermanni*). Those who survived were all instilled with a deep and everlasting love of liny.

In the Spring of 1990, Mike announced that he was giving up medicine, and they moved from Sheffield to a run-down farmhouse with three acres of land in Banffshire: Burns Farm near Cornhill. Mike proved his versatility in taking on most of the renovation and they got stuck into the good life. What would have been the *chalmers* (loft accommodation for farm workers above the farm buildings) was converted to a lab/studio and Mike was up with the sun working on his illustrations.

Mike was asked to produce a new colour plate for a facsimile edition of *Martin Lister's English Spiders, 1678*, edited by John Parker and Basil Harley, and published by Harley Books in 1992.

The next project was the publication of an updated, compact edition of *The Spiders of Great Britain and Ireland*, which had become familiarly known as Big Roberts. This paperback version was published in 1993, with the original text bound in one volume and the plates separately for ease of simultaneous reference. Several spiders which had been added to the British list, perhaps due to the increased spider recording his book had generated, were added in an appendix with new illustrations and descriptions.

Weeds may have attempted to grow in the smallholding but had no chance in Mike's studio, where work was now beginning on a small-format field guide, to be published by Collins. This covered all families but included only the larger and more distinctive of the money spiders (i.e. not the wee black jobs). This was for a more general audience, at a much lower price point, but still making it possible to identify all larger species. The big problem for Mike was that he was unable to use the illustrations from Big Roberts (for copyright reasons) in this new book (soon to become Little Roberts). Nothing daunted, he set about redrawing all the genitalia and creating a series of new plates with the legs intricately interwoven to fit the smaller format.

The Collins Field Guide was published in 1995 and is still in print (now by HarperCollins). It was so popular that it was translated into Dutch and French (two editions) and in total has sold over 40,000 copies—quite spectacular for a field guide, and even more so for one on spiders!

In his spare time (!) Mike also managed to produce a large number of paintings and drawings, using a variety of media to tackle very different subjects from spiders to portraiture to landscape. A one-man show was held in the grand surroundings of Castle of Park Hotel at Cornhill, not far from Burns Farm. Works were also submitted to exhibitions in Aberdeen and elsewhere. Some of these found their way into the ownership of BAS members (now prized possessions), while others commissioned work. Not only did Mike do the art work but he also often made the frames too.

During his time in north-east Scotland, Mike had a galvanising effect on the small number of Scottish arachnologists. Surveys were carried out, training events were held and disciples sent forth to convert the natives. The Roberts effect continues to this day, with a new generation of active arachnologists, and hopefully their off-spring.

Mike's second marriage sadly came to an end and, around 2002, he moved to Chirnside in the Scottish Borders. Mike had never been one for any communication system more complex than a telephone and fax machine. Letters and cards would be sent to friends, often adorned with thumbnail sketches and amusing cartoons, mentioning his fiddle playing and leading dancing on cruise ships with his partner.

Harley Books provided some non-spider illustration work during this period. Of particular note was his contribution to volume 4 of *The Moths & Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland*, published by Harley Books in 2002.

A high-power microscope was purchased and Mike moved into a phase of more detailed observation of spider microstructure, particularly focussing on the spinnerets which he thought might prove taxonomically useful. He collaborated with John Murphy (see obituary in this issue), producing detailed monochrome illustrations for John's *Gnaphosid Genera of the World*. The BAS published this more specialist text in 2007. It is, essentially, an atlas of distributions with representatives of almost all genera, over 100, illustrated.

Mike's final major illustration project, again working with John Murphy, was *The Spider Families of the World and their Spinnerets*, published by the BAS in 2015. Mike contributed to the text and provided all the drawings. Unfortunately, this attempt to use new morphological features to justify changes in taxonomy, did not find much favour with the arachnological establishment. However, it presented many opportunities for further research and only time will tell how much impact it will make in light of future genomic evidence.

In order to obtain specimens for study and illustration, Mike was in contact with arachnologists and museum curators across the world and made many friends and acquaintances. One curator remembers fondly the boxes of specimens being returned by Mike with Kinder Eggs inside!

Mike became quite hard to pin down in his last few years. He came to the second of the Scottish Arachnologists' Meetings (SAM) in Perth in 2014; disguised in a fedora, it took some attendees a short while to recognise the great man and some long-standing friends had to be reintroduced! He was

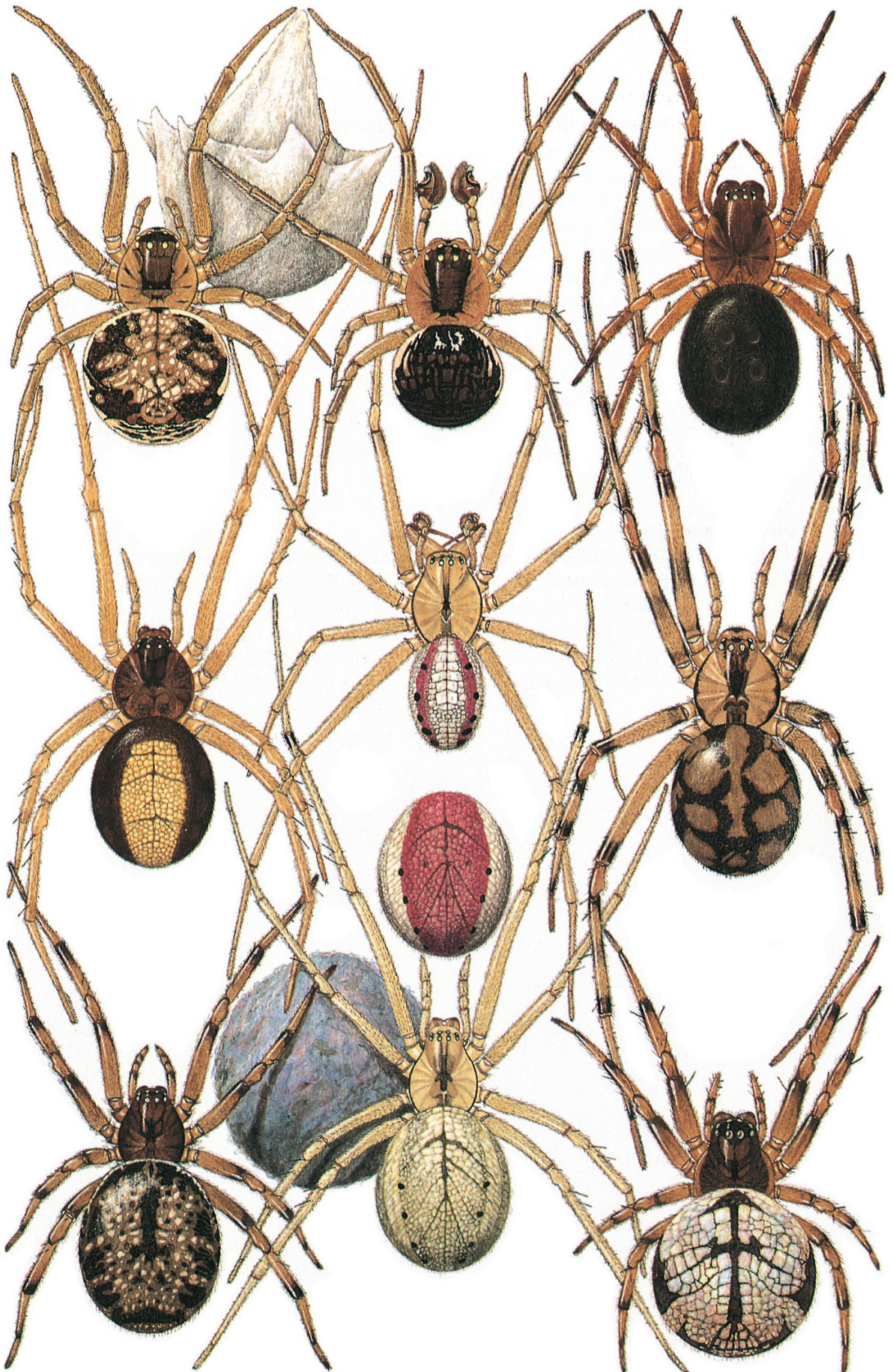


Plate 25 from Mike Roberts's *Collins field guide to the spiders of Britain & northern Europe*. London: HarperCollins (with permission).

persuaded to return to Perth for SAM 2015 where he talked about his work on spiders over the past half century. He appealed to all to take time to watch spiders and how they behave in the field. He recommended night time for observations, and to have your excuses ready for the police!

Indeed, Mike had assumed the aura of a mythical beast (*Robertus unicornis* perhaps), with one member, hearing that Mike was to appear at the Betwys-y-Coed field meeting in 2019, made the long journey from Somerset only to find he had already dematerialized!

Mike died on 26th October 2020 at his home in Chirnside. The study of arachnology has lost a great talent. We inevitably feel that Mike was taken from us far too soon but the hours spent at the microscope, or with pen and brush on his drawing board, would amount to more than most mortals could achieve in several lifetimes.

What of his legacy? Several important books, great art, making the study of arachnology more accessible and influencing three generations, and counting.

We are grateful to the many people who have contributed memories and details to this sketch of Mike's life in spiders. He had no truck with email or the internet and certainly not Twitter, but we will end with one online quote which sums up how many of us will feel: "Roberts's books guided me through much of the last five years of research in the most comprehensive yet accessible manner. His achievements are truly exceptional. A great loss to science." Many of those who expressed their sadness had never met him but were influenced by his books and illustrations.

M. B. Davidson
on behalf of the BAS and Mike's many friends

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