

## JAMES LEIGH ROSLIN WILLIAMS

James Williams, countryman and conservationist with a deep passion for otters, died on 4th February 2014, a day short of his seventy-fifth birthday. His knowledge and enthusiasm inspired so many people and led to tremendous achievements for otter conservation.

James grew up, the son of a Master of otterhounds, in a house where otters were intimately understood and respected as noble beasts of the chase and he could not remember a time when otters and their well-being were not a major aspect of his life. His father, Major Glenton Roslin-Williams, was deputy Master and huntsman of the Kendal and District Otterhounds from when the pack was reformed after the war, when James would have been ten years old, until his death in 1957 when James was eighteen. James had hunted with his father since he was four years old, following the rivers of Westmorland, North Lancashire and West Riding, where he especially befriended the pure bred otterhounds that formed the pack.

As a young boy James was brought up in the Lune valley, moving in 1948 from Mansergh to a home with a beautiful lake, woods and a little grouse moor at Lilymere, near Sedbergh. James often assisted his father in various escapades for the furtherance of otter conservation. One such adventure involved sabotaging dubiously sited otter traps that had seriously depleted the otter population on the Lune. James also used to help his father with trout conservation by hanging a gently swinging paraffin lantern from a bridge as a non-lethal method of deterring otters from visiting the spawning grounds. As a boy this task gave him immense satisfaction as he could watch safe trout darting away and find fresh spraint on the nearby lake shores as proof that his lantern had been necessary and effective.

Whilst at prep school James formed the Lilymere Rat Hunt: a pack comprising half a dozen assorted terriers. James hunted them with his sister, Anne, whipping-in. Supporters were charged a subscription and the whole thing was run like a proper hunt. They were very efficient rat killers.

Following in his father's footsteps, in 1965 James became Joint-Master of the Kendal and District Otterhounds. In

1967 he moved to Somerset to teach English at Taunton School and the following year he met and married Elizabeth Stansell. As he was now living in Somerset James naturally hunted with local packs: In summer he came out with the Culmstock Otterhounds, often still wearing the distinctive blue coat and grey collar of the KDOH, and in winter he followed the Beacon Beagles. In 1970, when Mike Milburn became Master and huntsman, James became secretary of the Beacon Beagles. Although never a regular huntsman James did, on occasion, step in to hunt both the KDOH and the Beacon Beagles. One day, hunting the KDOH from a meet in Sussex, by invitation of the Crowhurst, it was suggested to James that he might like to finish soon as hounds had been hunting for five hours. James received this news with astonishment; such was his absorption in his hounds he had no idea he had been out for so long.

James adored otterhounds and, with his sister Anne, became a founder member of the Otterhound Club and a distinguished judge, both on the flags and at Kennel Club shows. His appointments included the Otterhound Club championship show twice, one of which was the thirtieth anniversary show, Crufts and Honiton. On one occasion a puppy that had been winning other shows came before him on the flags. James did not like the feel of its coat and suspecting it was not waterproof he sent for a bucket of water, drenched the puppy and sent it out! The hunt staff were so incensed they changed out of their uniforms in protest. James was however, a charming yet decisive judge, always clearly explaining his decisions so that, in the show ring as on the riverbank, one always learned so much from him.

In 1986, following the death of Brian Vincent, James became chairman of the Culmstock, which by this time had become a mink hunting pack, a position he held until the year 2000. During the 1980s James was also the hunt's conservation officer, representing the Culmstock on such matters to the MMHA (Masters of Mink Hounds Association). At that time otters were in crisis. No one had noticed except the otterhound packs, whose business of regularly drawing the rivers with hounds gave them an alarmingly clear grasp of the situation. At the same time the alien mink were invading the waterways causing mayhem to wild and domestic fowl and the otterhound packs were swift to respond to the problem by switching their attentions to mink control. They continued to notice the presence of otters however, and James was instrumental in recruiting their help to monitor and document the otter's return.

James attributed his deep understanding of otters to hounds, who



**James Williams (centre) with his hounds on the Rawthey, with huntsman Tommy Harrison (right) and whipper-in Wilf Atkinson (left).**

taught him so much about this elusive animal. Hounds operate in the same way as otters; not by sight as humans generally do, but by scent. A sprainting rock, for example, is chosen not for its visibility but for its position in relation to the way the prevailing wind carries the scent across a bend of the river. That makes it a prominent position from an otter's point of view. Once that principle is understood, as James taught so many of us,

finding and interpreting an otter's work becomes logical. This was his legacy to us. Even identifying an otter's spraint can be doubtful for the inexperienced peering at a dubious dark blob on a shady rock; but just smell it! Then the immediate, vibrant nature of the animal that left it becomes clear: a sweet, wild, musky scent of pebbles and water weed and fish and of the eternal, untameable current.

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