

Short papers

The Portsmouth Group

This short article continues *BB*'s occasional series to celebrate notable characters of the British birding scene. It is an account of the collective endeavour of a group of young men who some 60 years ago banded together to study and document the birds of a single area. The origins of what became known as the 'Portsmouth Group' date from the late 1940s, when Dave Billett and the late Colin Tubbs (*Brit. Birds* 91: 155–156) were, quite independently, watching and recording birds at Farlington Marshes and Langstone Harbour, Hampshire. Their paths crossed in March 1951, by which time Colin was already contributing to the National Wildfowl Count scheme. Later that same year, Dave Billett encountered Dr Canning Suffern – inevitably known as 'Doc' – at nearby Titchfield Haven. Suffern's influence encouraged Dave's belief that a systematic approach to recording bird populations was both desirable and necessary to support initiatives to conserve Langstone Harbour. By 1952, other observers, including George Clay, John Conchie, Cliff Henty, Graham ('Taff') Rees and the late Bryan Renyard were regularly watching various sites around the harbour. They decided to co-ordinate their observations and submit a joint annual report to Hampshire's then bird

recorder, Edwin Cohen. It was Cohen, describing this 'young and energetic band' in the 1952 Hampshire Bird Report, who dubbed them the 'Portsmouth Group'. The group was not in any sense a formal bird club – people became 'members' simply by visiting the area regularly to watch birds. By the mid 1950s, other birdwatchers, including John Bowers, Michael Bryant, Michael Burnop, the late Peter Le Brocq, John Simons, Bill Truckle and Alan Walker, had also 'discovered' the marshes.

I grew up close to Portsmouth Harbour's north shore, just 15 minutes by bicycle from Langstone Harbour. As school contemporaries, I already knew three PG members, including George Clay. George's father hailed from nearby Hambledon where, with George and others, I spent much of my early teens bird-nesting, camping, and watching cricket. After leaving school, I began visiting Farlington Marshes more frequently in late 1954, although the few other birdwatchers I met were wary and gave me a wide berth. Some time later I learnt that they were unsure as to whether I had given up egg-collecting. Egging was still rife in those days and bird-catchers also frequented relatively quiet areas such as Farlington Marshes, where often they were seen setting mealworm-baited

spring-nets to catch migrants such as Northern Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe*.

In March 1955, I met Graham Rees at Farlington and was invited to join him for the day. Within minutes he had drawn my attention to a small group of Garganey *Anas querquedula*. This was a new species for me and I still vividly recall the drakes' conspicuous head pattern and rattling call. A little later we met Peter Le



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89. The PG at Farlington Marshes, summer 1955; from left John Simons, Dave Billett and Graham Rees; Roger Brown, far right, was a Titchfield Haven regular. Portsdown Hill is visible in the background.

Brocq; he had been watching Firecrests *Regulus ignicapilla* nearby and soon I had seen my second new bird of the day. It was hard to believe that such birds occurred in Hampshire, let alone so close to home. Thus began my association with the PG, and Farlington and Langstone became my local stamping grounds for the following decade. My horizon had truly widened and I soon began to subscribe to *BB*, the cost at that time being 3 shillings per copy and 30 shillings for an annual subscription. I remember being particularly excited by the front cover of the 1955 February issue, a C. W. G. Paulson photograph of the Farlington Marshes Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* of September 1954.

The PG put Farlington Marshes and Langstone Harbour on the ornithological map and other birdwatchers from both within the county and farther afield began to visit. We were always delighted to see our West Sussex counterparts and the PG yearbooks, maintained assiduously by Dave Billett, chronicle the 1950s visits of many well-known Sussex characters, including Roger Charlwood, the late Graham des Forges and Denzil Harber, Tony Marr, Roger Ruston and Roger Wilmshurst. Much good-natured rivalry existed between east Hampshire and West Sussex birdwatchers in those days, and the PG's rendering of 'Sussex by the Sea', one verse of which alluded to a lack of birds in Sussex, was both irreverent and perhaps even today unprintable.

The post-war improvement in working conditions meant that many enjoyed steady employment and increased leisure time. The PG, taking advantage of newly found opportunities, channelled their energies into countryside pursuits, particularly ornithology. With one or two exceptions, we all lived in the Portsmouth area and worked in factory or enclosed conditions – a common catalyst was a desire to abandon everyday surroundings and spend time in more congenial environments. Farlington Marshes became a second home and many of the PG spent every spare hour there. My memories of the marshes, the group members and the birds are many, diverse and inevitably nostalgic. It is now difficult to appreciate the relative remoteness of the area just 60 years ago, considering the close proximity of a city of 200,000 souls. Situated on the northeast outskirts of Portsmouth, it consisted principally of about 120 ha of grazing marsh, originally

embanked in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Access from public roads was by a rough, unmade track, bordered by bramble and hawthorn scrub. We saw few people, even at weekends, though its reputation as a prime blackberry-picking area meant an influx of folk in late summer and early autumn. There were few access restrictions, although the seawall footpath remained the best vantage point from which to view the harbour's surrounding mudflats and islands. However, care was required at times as the Royal Navy used the marsh as a weekday explosives detonation area until well into the 1950s.

Youthful enthusiasm soon broadened our activities to include other areas of Hampshire, not least the New Forest, where we watched and recorded breeding raptors, waders, Common Stonechats *Saxicola torquatus* and Dartford Warblers *Sylvia undata*, as well as contributing to Dr John Ash's Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* study. It was here that Colin Tubbs initiated his long-running Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* survey and Peter Le Brocq, acting upon immediate pre- and post-war information, 'rediscovered' Honey-buzzards *Pernis apivorus*. John Bowers and Bill Truckle introduced me to Titchfield Haven and Woolmer Forest, and together we began to visit the Isle of Wight regularly, where much time was devoted to sea-watching and migrant hunting at prominent headlands, particularly at St Catherine's Point. Here we sometimes encountered spectacular falls of migrants, these on occasions being attracted in huge numbers to the lighthouse. Attempting to combat the number of casualties, the lighthouse keepers were then still in the habit of erecting wooden-framed perches around the lighthouse balcony at peak migration periods. We were also lucky to find several rarities, including Britain's eighth Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus*, on 27th October 1963, the first of (what was then) an unprecedented six birds that autumn (*Brit. Birds* 57: 508–513). Back in the 1950s, few people owned cars and weekend expeditions (even to places such as St Catherine's Point) often involved complicated journeys by public transport, much walking and overnight bivouacs.

Tales concerning PG characters, particularly Peter Le Brocq, one of British ornithology's great eccentrics, became enshrined in our folklore. Out of deep concern of lightning strike



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90. Peter Le Brocq, using the LeBrocquar (Barr & Stroud 15x60, with rubber objective extensions) and an early monopod, Farlington Marshes, 1955.

and adder *Vipera berus* bite, he always carried a rubber-encased walking stick. On one occasion an adder struck at his stick and he distinctly heard the sound of fangs penetrating the covering. He immediately bought a new pair of sea boots lest his current pair were wearing a trifle thin! One Saturday evening in the mid 1950s, when he and others were returning home from birdwatching in West Sussex, the topic of conversation was differences in calls and display flights of Common Buzzards and Honey-buzzards. Showing not the slightest inhibition, Peter ran up and down the central aisle of a packed bus imitating calls of both species while waving and clapping his hands above his head!

Good-quality optical equipment was very expensive in the early 1950s and first binoculars were usually an 8x25 or 8x30 from the cheaper end of the market. Also popular among the PG were second-hand Ross 5x40 and 7x50, later upgraded to either Barr & Stroud 10x42s or 12x50s, or Kershaw 12x40s or 12x50s. However, self-confessed binocular fanatic Peter Le Brocq's early favourite was the Barr & Stroud 15x60. Complete with homemade rain-guard and long rubber objective extensions to combat extraneous light, this monstrous weapon soon became known as the 'LeBrocquar' and saw constant service throughout the 1950s and 60s. Peter was also fond of a porro-prism 10x50 Hendsolt, which, following a Le Brocq field

trial, led to a difference of opinion between Peter and a certain renowned binocular manufacturer at that time. The wire straps on a distant telephone pole were discernible through the Hendsolt but not with the other firm's 10x50. This led to Peter phoning the managing director in the early hours of the morning to complain about their binocular's shortcoming!

My primary recollections of Farlington's birds do not necessarily revolve around the rare or exotic; the bread-and-butter

species were an equally exciting prospect. In early March the PG watched eagerly for the return of displaying Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and, later in the month, for the first Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* and breeding Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus*. Groups of courting Common Shelducks *Tadorna tadorna* displaying on the marshes on spring evenings were always a delight to watch. Calm evenings in April and May provided some of the most evocative spectacles – especially when groups of waders, often in summer plumage and including Dunlins *Calidris alpina*, Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa*, Common Redshanks and Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*, would leave the mudflats, calling constantly, circle high around the harbour steadily gaining height and leave northwards over Portsdown Hill. Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* and dark-bellied Brent Goose *Branta bernicla bernicla* were two Langstone Harbour specialities at that time with up to 58 of the former and 200 of the latter, the harbour then being the sole Hampshire wintering site for both species. Many thousands of Brents now winter in Langstone and elsewhere in Hampshire, making the 1950's counts seem especially paltry.

The PG was responsible for adding several words and phrases, now in general use, to the birdwatcher's vocabulary. For example, Dave Billett introduced the terms 'seen off' and

'dipped out' to Farlington Marshes in 1954 during his service in the Royal Navy, where they were commonly used slang. Peter Le Brocq was the first person I heard using the expression 'dude' to describe a certain type of birdwatcher. The original dude was a birdwatcher from Kent who was renowned for wearing yellow gloves in the field. Peter also introduced the term 'good value' – the ultimate value for him was a dusk-hunting Merlin *Falco columbarius*, a Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* or Short-eared Owls *Asio flammeus* quartering the marshes on a winter's afternoon.

Little did we realise in the early 1950s just how much time and effort would be required by so many people to ensure the survival of both marsh and estuarine habitats and that the tradition of data gathering begun by the earliest members of the PG would prove so crucial. Development rumours (including a seaplane base, a new city to be built on stilts, and marina and recreational development) abounded in the early 1950s. As early as 1954 the Nature Conservancy, in the teeth of much opposition by local councils, was involved in attempting to have the marsh and harbour's natural history importance recognised by local nature reserve declaration. Chilling remarks by local councillors in favour of development included 'If the harbour isn't there when the Eider Ducks [*Somateria mollissima*] return, they'll have to go elsewhere' and 'The Brent Geese will have to move over a bit.' This last remark was made to Colin Tubbs by a proponent of a marina scheme that involved massive infilling and excavation in Langstone Harbour. The Hampshire & Isle of Wight Naturalists' Trust (now Wildlife Trust), which had already entered into a reserve

agreement with the marsh owner in 1962, finally secured a lease from Portsmouth City Council following its purchase in 1970 and declaration as a Local Nature Reserve. International designations, including that of Wetland of International Importance and Special Protection Area for Birds, were conferred on Langstone Harbour and the marshes in 1987. Among those who worked tirelessly to amass the waterfowl data on which the Langstone Harbour's conservation case was established was Bryan Renyard. For half a century he cycled (riding the same bike) the shores of Langstone and the Hampshire section of Chichester Harbour collecting information. Meanwhile, Dave Billett, having been closely involved in Farlington's affairs from the beginning, was appointed to oversee the marsh's management in a voluntary capacity, before becoming full-time warden from 1982 until his retirement in 1992. During his service there he almost lost his life on one occasion from a severe shotgun wound to the chest while attempting to apprehend a 'marsh cowboy'. Others deserving specific mention for their sterling work behind the scenes in those early years include Graham Rees and Michael Bryant.

In spite of what was achieved, the Farlington and Langstone area did not survive unscathed.



91. The Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* at Selsey Bill, Sussex, on 30th October 1960, was one of the first 'big twitches', involving mostly Hants and Sussex observers. Here, from left, Peter Le Brocq, John Bowers, Martin Port, Graham Rees (partly hidden) and Bill Truckle discuss the bird – all but Port were members of the PG.

Tony Marr

Much rough pasture and scrubland across the north end of the marshes, as well as similar habitats to the west, was lost to major road-building schemes. Storehouse Lake, a beautiful creek with its attendant eighteenth-century barn on the north shore of the harbour, was infilled and disappeared under a local council refuse tip. Another adjacent area of rough pasture, which had earlier been lost to playing-field development, was later the preferred site for Portsmouth Football Club's replacement stadium. Fortunately, this development was rejected at the eleventh hour, though playing fields remain there to this day.

British ornithology has changed dramatically since the 1950s, and in particular the lack

of mobility and access to near-instant information on rare birds must seem strange to many of today's birders. The PG's 'heyday' spanned a period of perhaps 20 years, although Dave Billett maintained the Farlington yearbooks for another two decades or more. For more than a decade, I was privileged to share the marshes and mudflats of Farlington and Langstone with the PG. While its members are now scattered, or in some cases sadly no longer with us, the PG laid a solid foundation for the birdwatchers, both amateur and professional, who followed. The skill and dedication of those early pioneers, and those who came after, ensured that the area has one of the longest-running waterfowl datasets of any comparable European site.

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Postscript As one of the Sussex 'characters' referred to by Eddie Wiseman, I might perhaps add a few personal memories of the PG as seen by an outsider. As a fourteen-year-old, I was introduced to Langstone Harbour and Farlington Marshes in November 1954 by Roger Ruston. I next visited 'The Marsh', as Farlington was affectionately known, in 1955 and met some of the PG lying semi-prone against the harbour wall, counting waders and wildfowl. This posture was to become a familiar one, adopted to ease long-distance watching over Langstone Harbour ('The Harbour') with their heavy binoculars and brass-and-glass three-draw telescopes. I recollect that I was wearing Hood Bullseye rubber boots and a Grenfell windcheater and using Barr & Stroud binoculars. By a happy coincidence, so were they, and I was immediately accepted as being okay and allowed to be considered as one of the lads.

To a schoolboy, the principal members of the PG were rather daunting field men and companions. They were older and very knowledgeable, especially at recognising small dots at great distance from their jizz. They taught us a lot and kept us on our toes. They were utterly dedicated to regular watching and meticulous recording at 'The Harbour' and 'The Marsh'. In the summer they visited 'The Forest' (the New

Forest) and in migration seasons, 'The Point' (St Catherine's Point). At times they joined in more distant jaunts, to Scotland and in later years to Turkey, with the LMOS – the Long Men Of Sussex, as three of us who were over six feet in height were known. This was an allusion to the Long Man of Wilmington, the famous chalk figure carved on the East Sussex Downs.

They were ahead of the game in identification, fieldcraft, birding slang, birding clothing and even camping gear. It was a privilege to be able to raise one's own game to new levels by following their example. They loved the 'value' in birding and its followers, and enjoyed endless banter and leg-pulling, much of which they instigated. They were fearless in taking to task anyone they regarded as incorrect, self-righteous or pompous, although it was always done with light-hearted irony and without malice (see *Brit. Birds* 96: 132–134).

The PG was a fine example of how much can be achieved when a common interest and purpose brings together a group of enthusiastic birdwatchers from widely different backgrounds. Their contributions to the Hampshire report (and occasionally to the Sussex report) illustrate how much they added to local ornithology, establishing high standards, setting the pace and, above all, enjoying themselves.

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