

Len Beer's Expedition to Nepal by Bob Mitchell

Len Beer in Nepal 1971 and 1975.

The Len Beer expedition to Nepal was arranged through the University College of North Wales at Bangor when he was the Curator of its Botanic garden at Treborth. In 1975 he was appointed Curator of Durham University Botanic Garden to develop the site.

Len had already collected in Malaya in the late 1960's. He was a member of the Trans-Africa Hovercraft expedition in 1969. He had strong links with the Natural History Museum.

The Nepal expedition would have a double function: Dr John Witcombe and Martin Mortimer would collect cereals from the villages of the Himalayan foothills toward the Everest range; while Len, Roy Lancaster and Dave Morris (BLM) would explore a little known area of east Nepal making herbarium specimens and collecting seed for cultivation.

I became friendly with Len through the University Botanic Garden network. We were both researching botanical areas of the eastern Himalaya at that time and also developing new botanic gardens, so we had much in common. The Nepal slides and a set of herbarium specimens, which Len bequeathed to me, are now lodged at the RBGE. The main herbarium collection is at the Natural History Museum.

This lecture is based on this material.

In June 1971 Len undertook a reconnaissance of east Nepal, prior to the other expedition members arriving in September. His arrival coincided with the worst monsoon in 10 years. His area covered the Milke Danda ridge to Topke Gola a remote village of 10 houses at 12,700' where they spent 10 days collecting and recording, then returning by Thudan, close to the Tibetan border, and Sedua to Dharan.

This area has strong botanical links with Sikkim and Tibet.

They had travelled through warm temperate vegetation containing *Holmskioldia sanguinea*, *Colquhounia coccinea* and *Aeschynanthus sikkimensis*. Orchids were present and *Coelogyne* and *Pleione praecox* and *P. hookeriana* in flower in their due season. Here too *Camellia kissii* and *Edgeworthia gardneri* – the bark used for paper making - were in flower. Mahonia nepalensis providing a stunning profile along the trail. With altitude they travelled through a stratification of *Rhododendron* species. Large leaved *Rhododendron hodgsonii* and *grandis* at lower elevations, before coming into maples – *Acer sikkimensis* and *A. caudatum*, *Sorbus ursina* and *microphylla* with *Rhododendron arboreum*, *campanulatum*, *cinnabarinum*, *campylocarpum* and many more. In the understory *Fritillaria cirrhosa*, *Roscoea purpurea alba* and the bright yellow and showy *Senecio diversifolium* got shelter.

The area around the Sacred Lake at Topke Gola, where they camped for 10 days, proved very fruitful. Here *Cardiocrinum giganteum* was conspicuous but here too primulas were abundant. The yellow *Primula calderiana* subsp. *strumosa* and the white *P. sikkimensis* var. *hopeana* and *P. macrophylla* var. *macrocarpa* all hugged the stream sides and *Parnassia nubicola* in the boggy ground. Climbing into the side valleys they found *Meconopsis napaulensis* and a white form, *paniculata*, *grandis* and *simplicifolia*.

From Thudan Len had traversed into the Iswa Kola, it seems an area not previously explored, and found a bountiful harvest. But the main party were prevented by an early onset of wintery conditions.

The dwarfer rhododendrons became more prominent with higher altitude: the creamy-white flowered *Rhododendron anthopogon*, and wine and white flowered forms of *R. lepidotum* while higher still *R. setosum* and *R. pumilum* were conspicuous on the high screes. Other Ericaceae include *Cassiope fastigiata*, *Gaultheria trichophylla* and *Vaccinium glauco-album*.

Len was responsible for introducing *Rhododendron glaucophyllum* var *album* in 1971. The cultivar name 'Len Beer' was given when this plant was exhibited in 1977.

Primulas too abounded with altitude. The impossible to grow *Primula soldanelloides* and *P. tenuiloba* they found on wet banks while *P. dickeana*, *buryana* and *glabra* the more drier areas. The lavender-flowered *Primula klattii* grew in the high meadows, while the white-flowered *Androsace lehmannii*, with its golden centre, was abundant swathed in the monsoon mists and covered large tracts of high hillsides. Here too grew the pink *A. globifera*. Gentians also abounded. *Gentiana ornata* in the moist ground while *Gentiana phyllocalyx* and *G. depressa* grew in the screes. So too did *Primula concinna*.

At an altitude of around 14,000' three *Meconopsis* were seen: *M. sinuata* and *M. lyrata* and the tiny pale blue flowered *M. bella* grew in rock crevices. He also mentions *M. horridula* and *M. discigera* at this high altitude.

Len returned to the Topke Gola and the Iswa kola in 1975 with his wife Sheila, the same year he was the SRGC travelling speaker.

Tragically he died in 1977, aged just 35.

Further reading:

Beer, L.W. 1973. *Nepal 1971* in *Journal Scottish Rock Garden Club* XIII(4): 281-294.

Beer, L.W. 1973. *Plants of East Nepal* in *Bulletin Alpine Garden Society*. 41(3): 256-262.

Lancaster, Roy. 1981. *Plant Hunting in Nepal*. Croom Helm.