

OBITUARY

Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, 5th Earl of Cranbrook (1933 – 2026)



Zoologist, field naturalist and conservationist whose studies of the wildlife and forests of Southeast Asia led to a lifetime's work in science, conservation and environmental policy

Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, 5th Earl of Cranbrook, who has died aged 93, belonged to an increasingly rare tradition of field naturalists for whom the boundaries between disciplines were always porous. Over nearly seventy years his work ranged across mammalogy, ornithology, tropical ecology, zooarchaeology, taxonomy and conservation, and from the identification of a fragment of bone or the behaviour of a cave swiftlet to the management of tropical forests and the making of environmental policy. He was a university teacher and expedition scientist, an author of standard works on Southeast Asian mammals and birds, a parliamentarian, the first chairman of English Nature and an influential figure in British and European environmental policy. Yet the breadth of the list scarcely captures the breadth of the life, because these were seldom successive occupations: many ran concurrently, connected by an apparently inexhaustible curiosity about the natural world and the people who inhabited it.

Although his scientific reputation was established in Southeast Asia, his life and work ranged far beyond it. He moved easily between scientific research and tropical conservation in Borneo and Malaysia; environmental policy, legislation and Parliament in Britain and Europe; and the wildlife, archaeology and institutions of Suffolk, from Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the Suffolk Flora Preservation Trust to Sutton Hoo, museums and local public life. These were not separate careers. The same habit of enquiry connected them: the exact identification of an animal bone from Niah, the ecology of a rainforest, the management of a national park, the wording of environmental legislation and the preservation of a Suffolk museum were all, at different scales, questions about how evidence should be understood and what should then be done with it.

Gathorne was born on 20 June 1933, the eldest son of John David Gathorne-Hardy, 4th Earl of Cranbrook, known as Jock, and Fidelity, née Seebohm. His father was a naturalist who had collected mammals and birds on a Frank Kingdon-Ward expedition to northern Burma before turning his attention to the wildlife of East Anglia and helping to found Suffolk Wildlife Trust. His mother was among the founders of the Aldeburgh Festival. At Glemham House, the children grew up among books, specimens and a changing menagerie of creatures brought in from the surrounding countryside, while musicians and artists associated with the new festival came and went. Britten dedicated *The Little Sweep* to the Gathorne-Hardy children and their cousins.

After Eton, two years of National Service as a Gunner and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he read Natural and Moral Sciences, Gathorne appeared destined for a more conventional life. He was halfway through the Foreign Office examinations however, when, over drinks in a Cambridge flat in 1955, he met the formidable Tom Harrisson—ornithologist, soldier, anthropologist, broadcaster and archaeologist in almost equal measure and at that time the curator of Kuching museum in Sarawak. Harrisson was then excavating the Niah Caves and, in expansive mood, offered work to anyone present who would make his own way to Sarawak.

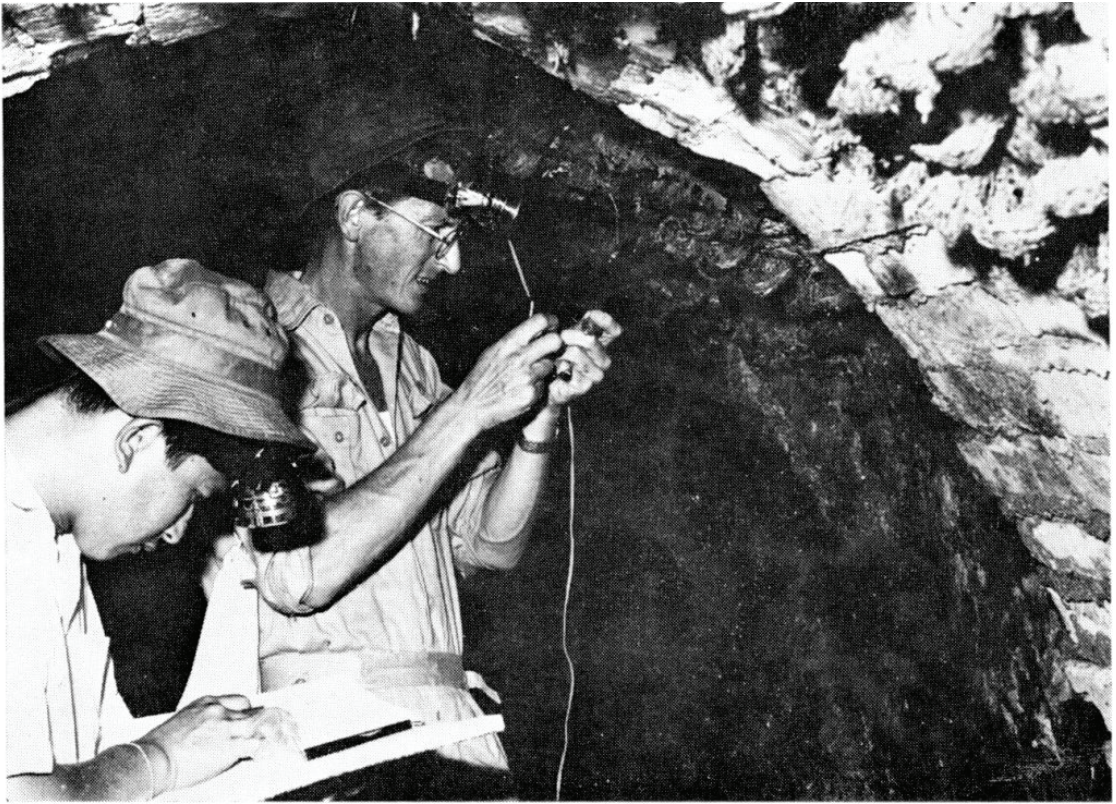
Gathorne took him at his word.

He travelled out by sea in 1956, using the long voyage to learn the rudiments of Malay and delighting in the flying fish that rose from the sea and stranded themselves on the ship's deck. Nearly seventy years later, he was still trying to persuade his grandchildren to recreate the journey with him, tempting them with the memory right up until his final days. In Kuching he joined Harrisson at the Sarawak Museum as a technical assistant and was soon sent to Niah to study the swiftlets and immense bat colonies of the Great Cave. What began as a narrowly zoological assignment developed into something more important. During the long 1958 excavation, he was given responsibility for the animal bones emerging from the archaeological deposits. Dissatisfied with the existing system of rough bag-counts, he began identifying and recording them taxonomically, trench by trench and layer by layer.

Contemporary archaeologists re-examining the same material found his counts matched their own almost to the last fragment. Working largely in isolation from the principal centres of archaeological science, he had independently developed methods comparable with the most advanced work of the period. He has since been recognised as one of the pioneers of modern zooarchaeology.

Niah shaped more than his science. Gathorne formed friendships with the indigenous communities among whom he worked and came to regard their knowledge as an essential part of understanding a place. Local people were not merely guides or collectors but collaborators whose observations could alter the questions being asked. Among the most enduring of these relationships was his friendship and scientific partnership with David Labang, a Kelabit from Bario, who accompanied him on later expeditions and became a collaborator in published research.

At Niah he was also welcomed into an Iban longhouse community and received the traditional bungai terung, or aubergine-flower, tattoos on his shoulders. Associated with *bejalai*—the journey undertaken in search of knowledge, experience and a place in the wider world—their symbolism was particularly apt for a young man who had travelled halfway around the world and found the direction of the rest of his life.



After completing his doctorate at Birmingham in 1960, Gathorne returned east the following year to teach zoology at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. His home was only 15 miles outside the city above the banks of the Gombak River, built around the ruin of an abandoned concrete-and-stone house. The romance of the place belied the thoroughness with which he had searched for it: it had to be within half an hour's drive of the University, stand above 800 feet where he had observed that the climate became cooler, possess a reliable water supply and lie within secondary rainforest. He cleared the scrub, opened a lawn down to the river and adapted a small dam for swimming. In 1964, he secured Nuffield Foundation funding to establish a permanent Field Studies Centre a few hundred meters upstream at Ulu Gombak. Set among primary and secondary forest, it allowed students to encounter tropical biology in the field rather than solely through the lecture room. Still in use half a century later, it was one of the achievements of which he remained proudest.

In 1967 he married Caroline Jarvis, who had worked under his former supervisor Solly Zuckerman at the London Zoo and was editor of the *International Zoo Yearbook*. These years were the beginning of a life long partnership in which Caroline helped make possible his ever expanding working life while nurturing all the things that mattered to them both at home. Together they transformed the house, enclosing its courtyard with a veranda and new wing. Water was brought down from the hillside through lengths of giant bamboo and entered the courtyard through a giant clam shell brought back from Tioman Island, overflowing into an open channel that ran through the kitchen and a rather rudimentary bathroom—Caroline generally preferred to wash in the river.

Before her arrival, the household had included, among other creatures, a territorial siamang gibbon; Orang Asli hunting dogs and Whippin, a Papuan parrot, remained all acquired by Gathorne on various expeditions. Their eldest son, Jason, was born in Kuala Lumpur. It was a family home, but one barely separated from the forest around it.

Malayan years also produced one of the enduring scientific friendships of Gathorne's life, with the ornithologist David Wells. Together they established the *Malayan Bird Reports* and eventually completed the long-unfinished fifth volume of *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula*. Gathorne's own *Mammals of Borneo* and *The Wild Mammals of Malaya* became standard reference works. Birds, mammals, swiftlets and the animal remains of Niah would continue to occupy him, in one form or another, for the rest of his life.

Even this only partly suggests the range of his scientific interests. A study might begin with the teeth of a bearded pig and lead into questions of age, hunting and forest ecology; the nests of swiftlets drew him into taxonomy, behaviour, cave ecology, archaeology and an ancient trade upon which local livelihoods depended. Animal bones from Niah became evidence for reconstructing vanished environments and human settlement tens of thousands of years earlier. Birds, bats, mammals, caves, forests and people continually led into one another. He was less interested in defending the boundaries of disciplines than in following a question wherever the evidence took him.

In 1970, Gathorne and Caroline returned with Jason to Glemham House; Flora was born the following year and Argus in 1973. Whippin came too. The move did not mark a withdrawal from Southeast Asian science, but the beginning of a pattern that lasted for decades, in which family life and Suffolk were combined with repeated returns to Malaysia, Sarawak and the wider region.



One of the most important came in 1977–78, when Gathorne returned to Sarawak as a deputy leader of the Royal Geographical Society–Sarawak Government Expedition and Survey to Gunung Mulu National Park. It was then the largest overseas expedition undertaken by the Society, involving 115 scientists and other specialists over fifteen months. Gathorne led the zoological programme, while the wider expedition ranged across botany, cave exploration, geomorphology and the ecology of tropical rainforest.

Its purpose extended beyond exploration. The recently created national park needed a scientific basis for its future management, and Gathorne subsequently worked with the Sarawak ecologist J.A.R. Anderson and botanist A.C. Jermy on a management and development plan embracing habitat protection, research, tourism and administration across the whole landscape. Mulu later became a UNESCO World Heritage Site

This movement from studying individual species to considering the future of entire landscapes was a natural progression. Gathorne never saw research and conservation as separate activities: knowledge provided the basis for protection, while without protected places the possibility of future discovery would itself disappear.

On his father's death in 1978, he succeeded as 5th Earl of Cranbrook and took his seat in the House of Lords. In a remarkable continuity, only 21 hours and ten minutes after entering the House, he rose to make his maiden speech during the second reading of the Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants (Amendment) Bill, carrying forward legislation on which his father had been working until his death.

He became an active and notably well-informed parliamentary voice on environmental questions over the following twenty years and three times chaired the European Communities Committee's environment sub-committee. The habits of a field scientist served him well: an appetite for evidence, attention to detail and a determination to understand how apparently small observations fitted into larger systems.

His engagement with the Nature Conservancy Council, the statutory body that preceded English Nature, was already substantial by the late 1980s. In February 1988, he initiated a Lords debate on one of its reports, and in November 1989, as a private member, introduced his own Environment Protection Bill. It proposed an integrated system of environmental protection built around an independent commission and executive and, in important respects, went further than the Government's own Environmental Protection Bill introduced soon afterwards.

At almost exactly the same time he was back in Sarawak, chairing an International Tropical Timber Organization mission into the sustainable management of the State's forests. Over three visits he sought evidence at every level, from forest-dwelling communities to state foresters, government and the timber industry. Its recommendations contributed to the developing framework for sustainable forestry and protected areas in Sarawak. While Parliament continued debating the shape of environmental regulation in Britain in 1990, Gathorne was in Sarawak leading that mission.

The juxtaposition was characteristic. One month might find him considering the machinery of environmental legislation at Westminster; another listening to people in a Bornean longhouse. To Gathorne, these were not different subjects but different scales of the same question: how knowledge of the natural world could be translated into its protection.

That same year, Chris Patten announced his appointment as chairman of the new conservation agency for England, then still a shadow body awaiting its formal creation. For more than a year Gathorne effectively chaired English Nature into existence, initially as the only person appointed to the organisation at all, before it formally came into being on 1 April 1991. He guided it through its formative eight years, determined that its advice to government should retain a strong and independent scientific foundation. Under his chairmanship English Nature developed the Species Recovery Programme, a precursor of much later work under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Those who worked with him remembered a chairman who listened carefully but was quite capable of resisting the government when the evidence required it. Derek Langslow, English Nature's first chief executive, recalled Gathorne's exquisite politeness lulling ministers into a false sense of security before he intervened with unexpected sharpness, dismantling their arguments with the precision of a rapier.

He travelled everywhere by train and insisted that Council meetings included field visits, whatever the weather. Tiring of carrying wellington boots around England, he arranged for a “Chairman’s pair” to be kept in each of English Nature’s 25 offices.

His contribution to environmental policy extended well beyond English Nature. He had served on the Natural Environment Research Council from 1982 to 1989 and, during the reorganisation of statutory conservation, on the Nature Conservancy Council and the emerging Joint Nature Conservation Committee. He later served on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, chaired ENTRUST, the environmental regulator established under the Landfill Tax, and from 1998 to 2006 chaired the advisory committee of NERC’s Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. From 1990 to 2006 he also chaired the Institute for European Environmental Policy, giving him an unusually sustained role at the meeting point of scientific evidence, government and the developing framework of European environmental law. Alongside this, he was a trustee of the Natural History Museum and later chairman of the International Trust for Zoological Nomenclature.

Yet even at the height of this public career, he continued tropical fieldwork. In 1991–92 he jointly led, with David Edwards, the Royal Geographical Society–Universiti Brunei Darussalam Rainforest Project at Batu Apoi. More than 120 people took part in the exploration and scientific survey of its largely undisturbed rainforest. Once again, however, its most enduring achievement was not simply an expedition but an institution: the project helped establish the Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre for future generations of Bruneian and international scientists and students. The surrounding forest became Ulu Temburong National Park.

It consciously carried forward the model Gathorne had helped establish at Ulu Gombak thirty years earlier. Expeditions ended; institutions could allow curiosity to continue.

The range was perhaps most remarkable because little of what came before was ever entirely relinquished. While chairing English Nature, he remained involved with tropical research; while helping shape British and European environmental policy he continued publishing as a zoologist; while leading work in Brunei he maintained scientific relationships in Malaysia and Sarawak; and throughout it all he remained involved with the natural history, archaeology, museums and conservation organisations of Suffolk. His career accumulated rather than succeeded itself.

By his later years, this accumulation was formidable. The young zoologist sent to count swiftlets and bats at Niah had become an authority on Southeast Asian mammals and birds and a pioneer of zooarchaeology; a builder of field centres and leader of major tropical expeditions; an adviser on the management of forests and national parks; a parliamentarian concerned with environmental legislation; the founding chairman of England’s statutory nature-conservation body; and a longstanding participant in European environmental policy. Yet he continued to identify specimens, answer researchers’ questions, edit journals and encourage students with much the same curiosity with which he had begun.

Suffolk meanwhile remained an active part of his conservation life. He became president of Suffolk Wildlife Trust in 1979, continuing an association begun by his father, and supported its development from a small county organisation into one of the leading Wildlife Trusts in Britain. He was closely involved with the Suffolk Naturalists’ Society and the Suffolk Flora Preservation Trust and served as president of the Sutton Hoo Society. He was a Suffolk Coastal district councillor, a Deputy Lieutenant and, closer to home, Clerk of the Parish Council for fifteen years.

His understanding of conservation extended naturally beyond wildlife to buildings, objects and collections. He served for many years as a director of the Museum of East Anglian Life at Stowmarket and played an important part in saving the Garrett engineering works at Leiston. As chairman of the group working for their preservation and, with Michael Hilton, a founding trustee of the Long Shop Project Trust in 1981, he helped secure the remarkable Victorian engineering complex as a museum. He remained closely associated with it for the rest of his life, latterly as patron; its Cranbrook Gallery now bears his name.

For Gathorne, a specimen in a museum drawer, an animal bone from Niah Cave, a Garrett steam engine and a living Suffolk meadow shared something fundamental: each contained evidence. Preserve it and another generation might discover something his own had missed.

His own curiosity showed little sign of diminishing. He continued publishing on mammals, swiftlets, zooarchaeology and former environments long after most contemporaries had retired. Questions first encountered at Niah in the 1950s still occupied him half a century later. In 2013, the *Raffles Bulletin of Zoology* marked his eightieth birthday with an entire supplementary volume, *Cranbrook at Eighty: His Contributions So Far*, containing 27 papers by friends, colleagues, former students and collaborators.

The breadth of his interests went well beyond science. A water-damaged and rat-gnawed Malay manuscript given to him at Niah in 1959 occupied him for decades and eventually became his translation of *The Ballad of Jerejenzang*. Invited to the International Heritage Poetry Festival at Niah in 2008, before a reading of his own poem titled the Niah Maiden he posed a characteristically uncomplicated question: “*Can a biologist be a poet? Why not?*”

In his tenth decade he was still editing, corresponding and publishing. At ninety he produced *Sarawak, Borneo, in 1941: The Chief Secretary's Files*, based on administrative papers from the last years of Brooke rule which had unexpectedly survived in an old suitcase and been handed to him for safe keeping.

Recognition came from both Britain and Southeast Asia. The Royal Geographical Society awarded him its Founder's Medal, one of its two Royal Gold Medals, in 1995. The Linnean Society elected him a Fellow *honoris causa*. Sarawak appointed him a Knight Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of Sarawak, carrying the title Dato Sri. In 2014 Malaysia conferred upon him its special Merdeka Award for his contribution to pioneering research and the conservation of its forest biodiversity; later that year Prince Philip presented him with WWF's Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Award.

Characteristically, he ploughed the financial part of the Merdeka Award back into Southeast Asian research and the support of younger scientists, including Project Tambun on the Mantanani Islands in Sabah, focused on the conservation of the Philippine megapode (*Megapodius cumingii*), locally known as the *burung tambun*. This instinct to encourage others ran throughout his career. Students became colleagues; their students became collaborators; friendships first formed in the forests of the 1950s stretched across generations.

Gathorne possessed an unusual generosity of attention that made the subject of the person before him seem, for that moment, to be the subject in which he was most deeply interested—an often it was, whether Megapodes or Malaysian swiftlets, Saxon archaeology, Suffolk wildflowers, an obscure poem or the contents of an owl pellet. His curiosity was not indiscriminate: it was informed and exacting, but enlivened by the connections he continually found between disciplines, places and people.



The boundaries between those people were equally fluid. Students became colleagues, colleagues became friends and friends were drawn into the life of the family. “*Treat family as friends, and friends as family*” was a maxim he shared and lived by and life at Glemham was a revolving door of visitors.

His library most of all reflected the accumulation of a long intellectual life: books, specimens, investigations and papers published and unfinished built up in layers around a man who never contemplated the concept of retirement. Gathorne died at home at sunset on 25 August 2026, Caroline and his adult children beside him and surrounded by his life’s work, as the first bats of the evening flew out into the last light. The *bungai terung* tattoos he had received at Niah almost seventy years earlier were still on his shoulders, ready, as tradition had it, to guide him on his final journey.

A half-dissected owl pellet still lay in a bowl on his desk.

Prepared and shared by Gathorne's family. August 2026.