



Citation for  
Professor John Rodwell  
for the award of the IEEM Medal on 25 June 2009 for his  
Distinguished Contribution to the Advancement of Vegetation Science  
in Britain and Europe

*We are here today to celebrate the career of John Rodwell, who more than any ecologist of recent generations has opened our eyes to the rich diversity of vegetation that occurs in Britain and is our foremost phytosociologist. Of course John's name will, for most of us, be irrevocably linked to the National Vegetation Classification (NVC). But we must not also fail to see him as a significant contributor to our understanding of the vegetation of Europe and a respected international figure.*

*Classifying, putting names to things, is a starting point for nearly every scientific discipline and British ecologists made an excellent start in the description and classification of our vegetation leading to the publication in 1939 of Sir Arthur Tansley's *The British Isles and their Vegetation*. However, after that, with a few striking exceptions such as Donald McVean and Derek Ratcliffe's *Plant Communities of the Scottish Highlands* in 1962, the description of our vegetation, our most basic ecological intelligence, lapsed into darkness and ignorance as the academic community in the UK and North America waged war upon the very idea of classification itself and the term phytosociology was entirely alien to their vocabulary.*

*This was a period when the classification of vegetation flourished in continental Europe and forays to Britain made by Braun-Blanquet and others, provided some of the first analysis of how our vegetation fitted to the broader European scheme. With the publication in 1952 of *Irische Pflanzengesellschaften* by Braun-Blanquet and Tüxen matters perhaps reached their lowest ebb. This book is where one must go for the first accounts of several types of British and Irish vegetation, not least our much loved 'MG5' meadows.*

*Perhaps no vegetation is so evocative of the countryside of these Isles, but to our shame they were first described in German. A student of British vegetation in the 1970s needed to be a good linguist as some of the most informative papers on vegetation classification were published in German, French, Spanish – even Norwegian and Portuguese; surprisingly little in English.*

*The stage was therefore set for John to make his outstanding contribution and to bring light and new order to our knowledge of British vegetation and system to its conservation and management.*

*After leaving South Yorkshire some of John's later adolescent years were spent living in Llandudno in the shadow of the Great Orme, the most important Carboniferous limestone grassland site in Wales. It is perhaps not surprising that after graduating with First Class Honours in Botany from Leeds University he went on to do his PhD research on limestone vegetation under the tutelage of Joyce Lambert at Southampton University.*

*As many of you will know John then spent four years at Oxford University, training for the priesthood and since 1975 he has maintained this vocation as a non-stipendiary priest in the Diocese of Blackburn.*

*But it was also science that took him to the North West of England, and in 1975 he also took on the role at Lancaster University of co-ordinator, and in due course the editor, of the NVC, a task which consumed his working life for more than two decades.*

*The fruits of these labours are well known. In 1991 *British Plant Communities Volume 1: Woodland and scrub* was published, followed over succeeding years by a further four volumes. Together they give a comprehensive and unified coverage of British vegetation which is the envy of many other European countries. Today almost no serious paper on British vegetation is published without stating the NVC type being researched. For the environmental manager and conservationists being able to negotiate the NVC and know its language is now stock in trade and not a few know some sections of *British Plant Communities* off by heart, in part a testament to the clarity and liveliness of its prose.*

*Arguably the most important contribution the NVC has made is in the field of conservation. Precise descriptions of vegetation ranging from coast to mountain top means that it has been possible to set clear guidelines for the selection of Sites of Special Scientific Interest, which ensure comprehensive conservation of our vegetation, and also the species that depend upon it. Equally important, with the coming into force in 1992 of the EU Habitats Directive, there was a need to be able to place our vegetation into the European context and again the NVC has been the main tool for this task.*

*As an academic perhaps the most distinctive contribution John has made over the years has been as a teacher, educating conservation professionals and others in the use of the NVC scheme. He has run numerous training courses, initially with the nature conservation agencies but since then for many other organisations. A community of specialists with a thorough understanding of our vegetation has grown up around him. In this he differs from most other university teachers (John joined the faculty at Lancaster University in 1991 and was made Professor of Plant Ecology in 1997), for his teaching has gone well beyond the confines of the undergraduate lecture theatre. No academic ecologist has engaged so directly and regularly with ecological practitioners. He has brought his enthusiasm, sense of fun and enjoyment to the subject which has inspired all who have come in contact with him.*

*John's research activities did not however end with the publication of the NVC and in 1991, he set up the Unit of Vegetation Science at Lancaster University. From this group appeared numerous publications and tools that can be used by the student and manager of vegetation. At this time John also broadened the geographical range of his activities. As an active partner in the European Vegetations Survey and European Vegetation Map Project he has helped to forge a better understanding of European Vegetation. He has been an advisor to the European Environment Agency and other national bodies in the EU. His reach has even extended to collaborations in Russia and Albania. However, John has always remained strongly rooted in his home patch, and the sustained research interest he and several of his research students have had in our upland hay meadows, has played a key role in ensuring the vulnerable status of this iconic habitat was recognised.*

*More recently John has returned to his roots as it were, to re-examine with typical thoughtfulness the landscape of his ancestral South Yorkshire from the point of view of ecology, community, identity and faith.*

*John retired from his post at Lancaster University in 2004, but this has not been a 'pipe and slippers' retirement, as he likes to point out. He continues to teach, research, publish, inform and inspire us - long may he do so!*

This citation has been written by John Hopkins with contributions from Tim Bines and Richard Jefferson.