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Gathorne-Hardy in Sarawak, now Malaysia

COURTESY OF GATHORNE-HARDY FAMILY

Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, 5th Earl Cranbrook, obituary

Zoologist, peer, and pioneering conservationist whose impulsive journey to Sarawak transformed the study of south east Asian wildlife dies aged 93

Saturday September 05 2026, 10.55am BST, The Times

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In 1955, Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, who was then Lord Medway and later became the 5th Earl of Cranbrook, was finishing a Cambridge degree and sitting entrance exams for the Diplomatic Service when he met a celebrated anthropologist named Tom Harrisson at a drinks party.

Harrisson was then curator of Kuching Museum in Sarawak, then a British Crown colony and now a Malaysian state, and was leading the excavation of the remote and largely unexplored Niah caves complex. He blithely offered to employ anyone who made their own way out to Sarawak. Cranbrook took him at his

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This impulsive decision changed the direction of his life. Harrisson sent his tall, energetic young protégé to Niah. There he soon proved his worth by developing a system of storing and recording the thousands of bone fragments he found on the caves' dirt floors, thus helping to create a detailed picture of life there 40,000 years ago.



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little birds. He worked out how they used “echolocation” — the emission of rapid clicks that bounce off rocks — to fly in the pitch-black caves. He investigated how they use their saliva to build the nests that the indigenous peoples turn into the delicacy known as bird’s nest soup — and how best to nurture and conserve them.

Driven by an inexhaustible curiosity, Cranbrook went on to write definitive guides to the birds and mammals of Malaysia and Borneo. He helped establish two national parks and preserve millions of acres of forest. He set up field study centres and inspired a new generation of Malaysian conservationists to continue his work.

“If you have ever marvelled at our national parks, felt pride in our ancient history, or wondered about the wildlife hiding in our jungles, you are looking at the living legacy of Lord Cranbrook,” said Robert Jacob Ridu, a former speaker of Sarawak’s parliament.

He “walked our land not as a colonial master or fleeting tourist, but as a humble student of our nature and a true brother to our people ... The next time you see a flock of swiftlets dancing against the Sarawak sunset, or walk beneath the cool shadow of a giant dipterocarp tree in our national parks, think of the English Lord who loved this land as his own.”

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The Niah Cave which Gathorne excavated as a young man

COURTESY OF GATHORNE-HARDY FAMILY

But Cranbrook did not neglect his own country. As an active member of the House of Lords for 20 years, he helped craft British and European environmental policies in the late 20th century. Polite but determined and seemingly tireless, he chaired numerous commissions, councils and committees dealing with environmental and conservation issues, nationally and in his beloved home county of Suffolk.

He received the Royal Geographical Founder's Gold Medal and the WWF Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Award for his work. In Sarawak he was created Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak — the equivalent of a knighthood. He even had a burrowing louse and a rare white-toothed shrew (*Crocidura gathornei*) named after him.

Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy was born in London in 1933, the oldest of five children of Jock Gathorne-Hardy, the 4th Earl of

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father's death in 1978.

He was raised on the family estate at Great Glemham, Suffolk, amid a menagerie of animals. Britten, a family friend, wrote a short opera for him and his siblings. At Eton he took up rowing to avoid cricket and spend more time studying birds. He did two years of National Service with the Royal Artillery, then read natural and moral sciences at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, before his fateful encounter with Harrisson.

After an initial two-year stint in Sarawak, he returned to do a PhD at Birmingham University on the glands that control birds' breeding instincts, somewhat improbably attracting press coverage for his discovery that pigeons will not sit on sharp, pointy eggs.

He returned to newly independent Malaysia in 1961, and for nine years lectured at the University of Malaysia while living with a siamang gibbon and Papuan parrot in a spartan house above a river in the rainforest outside Kuala Lumpur.

He led field trips and expeditions into jungles and up mountains. He delighted in sharing his knowledge with young Malaysians and teaching them the importance of science and conservation. He embraced indigenous communities and learnt to speak Iban and Kalabit. He was inducted into an Iban longhouse community and given traditional aubergine flower tattoos — *bungai terung* — on both shoulders.

In 1967, he married Caroline Jarvis, the daughter of two MI6 spies. They were friends at Cambridge, after which she worked at London Zoo with Solly Zuckerman and [Desmond Morris](#). The couple returned to Malaya, where their first child, Jason, now an artist and curator, was born. They later had two more children — Flora, a landscape designer, and Argus, an architect. All three inherited their father's passion for the environment.

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of his own country.

In 1976, he chaired an RSPCA inquiry that argued that animals and fish experience pain, and recommended proficiency tests for those who shoot and fish recreationally. In 1978, he inherited his father's seat in the House of Lords, tearfully delivering his maiden speech during the second reading of his father's Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Bill just three weeks after the 4th Earl's death.

Over the following two decades — sitting as a Conservative peer — he became a leading voice on environmental issues in the upper house, helping shape government policy during the 1980s and 1990s.

He chaired the environment subcommittee of the European communities committee and the Institute for Environmental Policy, and he sat on the science and technology select committee, the Royal Commission on Environmental Protection, the Nature Conservancy Council and the Natural Environment Research Council. He was also a trustee of the Natural History Museum.

In 1990, Chris Patten, then environment secretary, appointed him chairman of English Nature, a newly formed agency that promoted the conservation of wild animals and wild places. Over the next eight years he established it as an independent force that developed programmes to reward landowners for environmental improvements, expanded national nature reserves and acted to protect threatened species ranging from red kites to the Fen Raft Spider.

He insisted that his fellow board members join him on field trips, once dragging them across the Wash during a fierce winter snowstorm. He kept wellington boots, dubbed the "chairman's pair", at all English Nature's 25 offices.

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None of that diminished his interest in southeast Asia. In 1977, for example, he was deputy leader of a Royal Geographical Society survey that produced a viable management plan for Sarawak's newly formed Gunung Mulu National Park.

In 1988, he led an investigation into the destruction of Sarawak's primary rainforests that produced a landmark agreement on sustainable logging between timber interests, conservationists and government. In 1991, he jointly led a Royal Geographical Society project that helped establish the Ulu Temburong National Park in Brunei's rainforests.

At about the same time, he translated into English an epic Malay poem, *The Ballad of Jerjezang*, a water-damaged, rat-eaten copy of which had been handed to him 30 years earlier.

Cranbrook was heartbroken when he lost his seat in the Lords in 1999, but understood the rationale for abolishing the automatic right of hereditary peers to sit in parliament.

He was 66, but never considered retirement. In his nineties, he still corresponded with his many Malaysian protégés. Only last year he published the latest of his many books — edited papers relating to Sir James Brooke and the “White Rajahs” of Sarawak. He was planning to take his grandchildren to Malaysia by ship this Christmas.

He instead died surrounded by the copious books and papers that embodied his life's work. The interior designer Ben Pentreath once described his library as “a veritable cabinet of curiosities, knowledge bursting from every shelf. Books have taken on a geological formation, layered in strata on every surface, into which one must mine deeply to find the required text.”

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Leendert Rookmaaker  



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The very best sort of Brit; interested, interesting, humble and very useful. RIP

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A good man who did so much. Rest in peace.

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He embodies the old Conservative post war party which cared for the environment and the planet. A noble man indeed

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Passionate about the environment and especially his home county of Suffolk. Interesting how chance encounters can shape one's life. R.I.P

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An excellent obituary for an outstanding man. RIP.

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House diminished it and what a motley lot have replaced people like him.

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Sounds like an amazing man!

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What a life he lived - clearly incredibly driven and hard working throughout.

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What a wonderful life he led. We could do with more like him to help our planet!

Mrs S

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N

nicholas cox

...

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Sounds like a good chap.He would be shocked by the terrible pollution in Sarawak right now though.Kuching is the most polluted city in the world today due to fires out of control as the rainforest is destroyed,mainly by the palm oil industry.We need more people like him to stop this desecration

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K

K Dixon

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I feel exhausted just reading through his list of accomplishments! What a life!

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He sounded like a really good person...

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5 SEPTEMBER, 2026

A wonderful innings with much achieved. And the rather stylish bonus of giving his name to a burrowing louse. Rest in Peace. *(Edited)*

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(14\)](#) • [Share](#)**K****K Pretorius**

5 SEPTEMBER, 2026

So many well-deserved accolades. But I can't help feeling that many people would find the idea of having a burrowing louse named after them, to be a bit, well, lousy. I suspect not the Earl though.

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RIP and condolences to Lord Cranbrook's family and friends. He sounds absolutely glorious. A life supremely well lived.

(Edited)[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(9\)](#) • [Share](#)**Andrew Wildblood**

5 SEPTEMBER, 2026

with bloke's like this thank goodness the hereditary concept was abolished - we've got that crooked underpants selling Glaswegian instead now - progress they call it....R.I.P. sir

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6 SEPTEMBER, 2026

We all need a Gathorne.

[Reply](#) • [☆ Recommend \(6\)](#) • [Share](#)**Philip Sewell**

6 SEPTEMBER, 2026

Hats off to a wonderful chap and a life's work of much value.

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Amazing life



Christopher Long

6 SEPTEMBER, 2026

Excellent man, excellent life...

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K Grimshaw

7 SEPTEMBER, 2026

I don't know and I could be wrong but it seems more plausible that he served as chair of the parish council (as his [corrected] son currently does) than as its clerk.

(Edited)

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June Wright

8 SEPTEMBER, 2026

His younger son serves as chair of Parish council

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Mrs L M Hill

8 SEPTEMBER, 2026

When reading the Time's' obituaries I often think what a pity I did not know more about it these fascinating people whilst they were alive. (Edited)

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Alan Bird

7 SEPTEMBER, 2026

I wonder what his relationship was to Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, another amazingly multi-talented author and man.

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Ian Rickword

7 SEPTEMBER, 2026

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...

13 SEPTEMBER, 2026

His sons must be immensely proud of him. What an incredible life!

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...

9 SEPTEMBER, 2026

I had the privilege of serving on the Freshwater Group of the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, which Lord Cranbrook chaired. He was immensely knowledgeable and a deft chairman, able to bring together disparate views with warmth, friendliness and good humour. He will be greatly missed.

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...

6 SEPTEMBER, 2026

"Earl of Cranbrook' not 'Earl Cranbrook' (headline above).
(Edited)

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...

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And I wondered why they chose Cranbrook. I went to school there. He didn't...

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