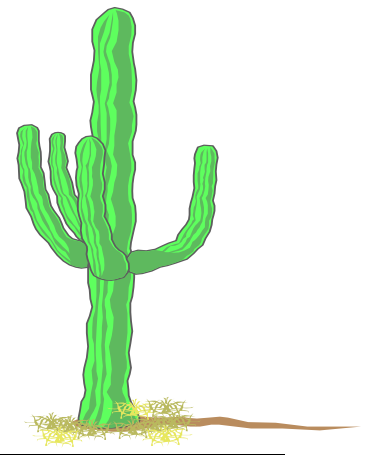


Oxotica

The Newsletter of the Oxford Branch of the
British Cactus and Succulent Society

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first all-digital edition of the Oxford Branch newsletter. For readers outside the Branch I should explain that a printed edition used to be sent to all Branch members, but that it can no longer be produced economically.

Started in 1996, Oxotica was produced on paper until this year and, since the end of 2007, has been printed in colour. Since 2006 when our web site was developed, a file of each new newsletter has been added to the site. Now, all the earlier editions have been converted to pdf files and added to the web site. As a result they have been published in colour for the first time.

Although it was great to produce a traditional printed newsletter, especially the coloured version, moving to an all-digital form means that some constraints imposed by the need to print Oxotica on paper have gone. .

It is intended, at least for now, to retain the look and feel of the printed newsletters. I hope that any changes which may be made will be seen by you, the reader, as improvements.

Enjoy!

David Greenaway



Inside ...

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The 14th WALTHAM FOREST CONTINENTAL CACTUS CRAWL
22nd – 25th March 2012
Or: The Coach Trip That Lost Two Drivers
by John Watmough

Prologue. *It all starts with a cat. This cat belongs to our incomparable driver, Ricky. It succeeds in the very pinnacle of feline ambition by pitching its fond owner down a flight of stairs, breaking his shoulder. Joyce explains that the coach will not, therefore, be starting in Witney but will be supplied by a completely different company. The Oxford contingent, being your correspondent and Martin Doorbar, will have to forgo the pleasure of watching dawn break over Headington Roundabout, but must make other arrangements to join the party. We agree to abseil from a helicopter on to the coach roof on the M20, but reluctantly concede that this will be difficult on account of Martin's insistence on bringing his daughters' massive toy box for filling with plants. We therefore end up driving to Chingford like normal people.*

Thursday Cars are parked with the maximum of fuss; as usual, we are told. Coach arrives, bearing the indispensable Nicky, our organiser and guide. It is an elderly but serviceable vehicle emblazoned with a huge Flying P, standing for Premier Coaches of Luton. The driver is an engaging young Albanian Irishman from Limerick called Jay. But it is the wrong coach. At least, the seats do not correspond with Joyce's diagram. The toilet is at the back, taking up Malcolm Pym's old place. Passengers have to be reshuffled so that seats match bottoms. Alan Rollason is no longer toilet janitor, and Barry Phipps is assigned his own private universe on the dickey seat.

We stop on the Chelmsford Road to pick up the Edes, the Tates, and Rick Gillman. No Essex jokes this year, only sad jokes about incontinence and memory loss, but your correspondent has forgotten them all.

Not much delay at Ashford. Jay doesn't know the magic spell and has difficulty fitting the coach into the train. Half an hour later, but an hour and a half by clock, we are in Calais, and the Flying P becomes "Le Pet Qui Vole". Find that the toilet is not equipped with an interior light, so there is Flying Pee followed by banging and swearing when the occupant can't find the door catch.

Rapid transit through Belgium, except for one delay where a lorry has driven through the parapet of a bridge over the motorway. Other carriageway blocked by debris – Flying P joins Stationary Q caused by rubberneckers. Usual route to Succulent Tissue Cultivation. Admire the beautiful road surfaces built just for us. My readers in the Netherlands certainly respond to gentle criticism. No dung-camouflaged caravan, no mangel-wurzels, no wading through sea water. Haworthia lovers (who are over-represented on these trips) are ecstatic.

Then on to the Postillion Hotel, Dordrecht, who looked after us so well last year. Not only have they not gritted our beds, they have supplied us with a complimentary bottle of fizzy wine. It is almost as if we haven't been away. Mary Tate is provided with a falling-out proof bed.

Friday So it must be Germany. The frontier post, where English tourists used to sing "Two World Wars and One World Cup, Doo-Dah", is abandoned and weed-strewn. Rear passengers tell Joyce that Barry is missing even when he isn't. Trouble-free journey to Piltz for cactophiles to start unloading their euros. James Gold buys huge Pachypodium. Fabulous private collection, especially Gymnocalyciums.

Drive northwards to the little town of Erkelenz, which has a suburb called Golfcart, which has a

pretty hamlet called Hovel, which has a big greenhouse surrounded by pensioner-proof fencing. This is Specks' place. Wizards wave 50-euro notes and Ernst and Marita appear as if by magic and unpadlock the gates. Usual mad rush to buy botanical curiosities, while cactus purists glower and drink all the coffee. Some enthusiasts find they still have some euros left and rush round on a second circuit.

Not far to Ingo Breuer's place. He still has his rolling tables. Stirling suggests that if he removed one of them it would be possible for his customers to inspect his stock. This does not seem to meet with approval. No injuries this year.

Return via Moenchengladbach bypass, then dogleg towards Roermond. Very successful day. Nothing can go wrong now. John Jackson announces on the tannoy that there will be plenty of time before dinner. Stop at Nederweert and fill up with 300 litres of diesel. But wait! The coach company's payment card is not accepted. Is it the card, or is it the machine? Frantic telephone calls. After 40 minutes Nicky pays for it out of his own resources. Late for dinner.

Saturday The Fabulous Three go to The Hague for a cultural visit, leaving their less cultured husbands to scramble round the Dutch nurseries. First stop Westeijn's. Overgrown cycle track to nursery is now a tarmac road with proper kerbs. Behold the power of the Internet! Westeijn has monocultures for the wholesale market, but singletons and nonconformist plants are put to one side where we are glad to buy them and he is glad to get rid of them.

Next stop is Van der Linden's. Eddy buys a huge plant, maybe a *Cyphostemma* but certainly not a *Lithops*. Mark Plumer buys a *Gymnocalycium* on a stick that has been dipped in luminous red paint. He says it is to annoy us. It does. Your correspondent finds several thousand *Lithops* that have been chucked out because they haven't adapted to their peat growing medium. He takes several handfuls.

Third is Cok's. Cactus purists hog the comfortable chairs and moan and drink all the coffee. Succulent lovers scour the premises for

unusual items. Traditional gathering round the trapdoor in memory of Malcolm, who once fell through it. Ina has difficulty cramming all the banknotes into her cashbox, so people must be finding plants all right.

The last stop is Two Shovels. Cactus fiends have been waiting for days for this. Emergency exit on Flying P doesn't work, so geriatrics have to leap into the middle of the road before sprinting to the Special Corner. Any spending inhibitions have finally dissipated. Extraordinary sums are spent on *Eriosyce* footballs, *Thelobergias*, mis-shapes, and plants sporting varietal names that have never been recorded anywhere else. Coach is filled with caltraps, man-traps, and tank traps. Return to the Postillion in plenty of time to pack plants and get in a few bevies before dinner. Time to relax, because we have done all we came to do and nothing can go wrong.

Sunday Nicky is ashen-faced and tight-lipped. At 4:00 in the morning Jay goes into hospital with a strangulated hernia. He will not be driving us home. Nicky and Premier Coaches find a replacement driver, Dutch Piet, but he will not arrive until 10:30. So we arrange our own packing. Gary Hill, who is the shortest and strongest of the party, gets inside the luggage compartment while Mark Plumer hands him the boxes. Others police the scene to make sure that nobody else helps. So the job is completed efficiently and quickly. "Better than my last job, playing Tweedledee in a children's theatre", says Gary. As soon as Gary has finished Jay comes bounding up. He must have sacrificed his cock to *Asclepias*, because his hernia is remarkably better. At 10:30 Dutch Piet arrives, and off we go. A hurried Belgian lunch, a brief stop at the Chocolate factory among hordes from Harlow New Town, then off to Calais.

Next stop British Immigration. What is this? It seems that Jay is by no means an Albanian Irishman but an Irish Albanian, so he is not Jay but Xhej, and he is not allowed to enter the UK by the front door. It seems he will have to use the back passage, like other lesser breeds without EU law, and return home to Luton via Rosslare or Dun Laoghaire. So we leave poor Xhej behind. We are ushered straight on to the train.

Dutch Piet has obviously done this before, for with a sashay right and an entrechat left the Flying P is up the train like a rat up a drain, if my readers will forgive the poetry. Round of applause from the astonished muggles.

So we are early home in spite of everything. Dutch Piet has to take the coach on to Luton and then return straight to Rotterdam to take a party

of schoolchildren to the Alps. John as usual refuses to say whether there will be a trip next year. Nicky stays silent. His efforts have been tremendous, but he will hardly want a repeat. But we average punters all agree that it was a Jolly Good Trip

JW

[Last time John sent in a letter entitled “A Chicken Writes” and this apparently is a follow-up. *Ed*]

A Chicken Replies

Girls! Do not take any notice of Hen Diadys (who lays the double yolkers). She is one of the Rhode Island Reds, who bizarrely maintain that our hencestors domesticated the wrong species of Ape. Indeed, they claim that our Apes are so depraved that they would even eat *us* if their mouth parts were better developed.

The truth is that our Apes were selected for their insatiable instinct for carrying things about. Over many generations their residual wings have been developed for just this purpose. Give them a pile of grain and they will shovel it into sacks and carry it about for our benefit.

We have personally seen our Ape with five or six other Apes in his glass coop, and all of them were lifting up his weeds in pots and making the same silly noises that pigeons do. Indeed, several times each year our Ape carries most of his largest weeds away somewhere first thing in the morning and carries them all back again in the evening. There can be no reason for this behaviour; they just can't help it.

It is a well-known fact that Apes amputate the feet of their young as soon as they are hatched, and cram the stumps into heavy bags resembling the chrysalises of insects. They did this originally so that their young had to be carried about. But nowadays each generation has to amputate the feet of the next, otherwise their adults would be at a terrible disadvantage at the feeding trough.

Cluck Cluck.

JW

VISITORS WELCOME: AN AUSSIE ADVENTURE

By Gillian Evison

On a perishing day at the end of February, I found myself, as courier no. 3 for a multi-million pound consignment of Persian manuscripts, in a bonded warehouse at Heathrow waiting for clearance to fly the cargo to Melbourne. Not being a city girl, the prospect of a three week stay in the centre of Melbourne had me thinking about places to see plants and some last minute online research yielded the Cactus & Succulent Society of Australia, based in Melbourne and with a meeting during my stay.

The website said 'Visitors welcome' so I e-mailed. Relying on public transport, my expectations of being able to reach the meeting were low but my new Australian friends assured me that their hall was just opposite a stop on the Glen Waverley metro line. How could I resist?

My first port of call, in a heatwave worthy of Death Valley was the new succulent garden on Guilfoyle's Volcano at Melbourne's Botanic Gardens. The 'Volcano' is a reservoir, recently restored and planted with almost 17,000 plants from 250 different species. Succulents tumble down the sides of the Volcano in xerophytic lava flows of blues, golds and reds, with further colour being supplied by over 150 tons of mulch made from crushed terracotta tiles and bricks.



Agave 'Blue Glow', *Crassula falcata* and *Echinocactus grusonii* at Guilfoyle's Volcano

Wearing a conspicuous cactus brooch, in the hope fellow cactophile might spot and rescue me if I got lost, the next adventure was down the Glen Waverley line. Finding the meeting hall proved just as easy as Vice-President Noelene and Secretary Barby had promised and I was given a warm welcome, a lovely card from members of the committee and some back issues of *Spinette*, the CSSA journal.

After 10 years of drought in the State of Victoria the interest in succulents has grown and the CSSA expects to see around 70 members at every meeting. The large turnout brought lots of tempting members' sales plants and it was hard to look and not buy! The programme was rather different from the typical British meeting with the talk occupying only the second half of the evening. This left time for a specimen plant auction (all sellers are asked to donate an item for auction in lieu of paying a sales commission to the Society); a Quick Fire session led by seasoned grower, Victor, on buying plants; and an introduction to 'Blue Plants' by Andrew to help members vote in the Plant of the Month contest. With so many new members, the Plant of the Month is based on physical characteristics, such as colour and texture, to help encourage those who are not so sure about plant names. I was allowed to vote as well and couldn't resist this venerable *Leuchtenbergia principis*. Lucky winners receive very handsome certificates, guaranteed to encourage those new to showing. By having a variety of activities in the first half of the evening members are encouraged to attend, even if the talk in the second half covers an area of less interest or seems daunting to the novice. Having given talks at branches where X or Y hasn't turned up because they don't like the subject of the presentation, maybe there is something we can learn here from our Australian cousins.



The Vice-President of the CSSA, Attila, gave the talk of the evening. I had heard him speak at the American convention and so knew that I was in for a treat. His fascinating introduction to the Australian bottle trees left me obsessed with *Brachichytons* and, as committee member Diane kindly offered me a lift home, I was able to stay to the end without worrying about catching trains. While these amazing bottle trees are too big for greenhouse culture, removal of the growing tip at an early age can produce wonderful caudiciform bonsai and we were shown some lovely potted specimens. Perhaps they will reach Europe in time and we will be able to try them for ourselves.

In the interval Victor, the committee member who had led the lively Quick Fire session, kindly offered to drive me out to some succulent sights if I was at all interested. Interested? At this stage Victor did not know what a succulent-obsessed madwoman he was dealing with. Despite my changing work commitments and Victor's own hectic schedule, he performed miracles. Some of my most treasured memories of Australia are of trips in Victor's 'Tour Bus' sustained by sandwiches (eggs from the in-laws' chooks) and food prepared by his lovely wife Cristina. Victor's own garden is packed with cactus and succulent goodies along with carnivorous plants, orchids and garden treasures such as the Woolemi Pine.



He makes use of absolutely every available space and I was particularly taken with the succulent trays reached by ladder. I've since been looking at the roof of my garden shed and thinking...



Thanks to Victor and Cristina, I managed a trip to Geelong Botanic gardens to see my very own *Brachichyton rupestris*. By this time the British weather had followed me and it was raining all day every day but when did that ever put off a dedicated succulent sightseer?



Victor also managed to arrange a visit to Attila and Michele's garden, which makes use of succulents as landscaping plants and is open to the public by appointment. Attila and his wife Michele were busy preparing for a big plant fair so it was very kind of them to spend some time showing me round and I felt very privileged to have a personal private tour. This garden put me in mind of Huntington in the way that the succulents work with the landscape, though it has a completely Australian flavour with *Brachychitons* providing focal points amongst the more familiar *Agaves* and *Aloes*. It is a tremendous achievement considering it is the work of two people and, yes, that includes Attila and Michele heaving rocks around to make the boulder sculptures. One of the biggest thrills was to be able to see *Calandrinia* growing in a flat sandy area. Attila explained that they do not do particularly well as horticultural specimens but it was great to see plants that I had only encountered previously as photographs in his book on Australian succulents.



In an action packed day we also managed Cactus Corner. It seemed very strange to have a dedicated Cactus Garden Centre in an ordinary shopping complex but this is an indication of how, in a country where many succulents can be grown outside, they are much more integrated into mainstream gardening. I'd certainly like to have a Cactus Corner next door to my local Garden Centre, though it probably wouldn't do much for my bank balance.



As a lover of caudiciforms, the final treat was a trip to Theo and Helga's collection, set in the temperate rainforests of the Dandenong. Theo built his beautiful house himself, and also the wonderful greenhouse, nestled in the midst of the many trees that he has grown from seed.



At the time I visited, Theo and Helga were considering selling their succulent paradise, which included forests of huge *Dioscorea elephantipes*, any one of which would cause a stir at our forthcoming National Show. The matching pair of giants on either side of their front door were taller than me and in superb condition. The trip ended with Theo and Helga giving me a bag of huge tomatoes of all different colours and tastes to take back and scoff in private in my hotel room.



When the Cactus & Succulent Society of Australia say ‘Visitors Welcome’ they really mean it and I can’t thank them enough for the warm reception and time they were prepared to spend on showing me around. Whilst 10,000 miles is perhaps rather far to travel to drop in on a different style of meeting, if you are ever in Melbourne on holiday or business, look them up, as you can be assured they are an extremely Pom-friendly bunch.