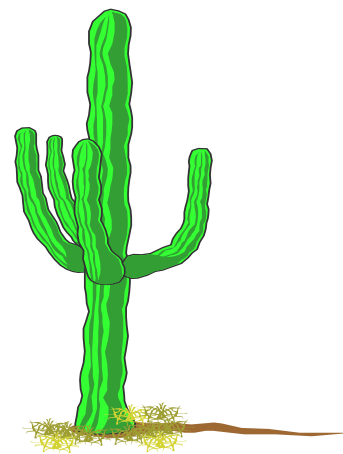


Oxotica

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

June 2013

Volume 18, Number 1



DROOLING SPINES

by John Watmough

SHOWING OFF

It was in the remote 1980's that Cathy Darbon persuaded the BCSS to let Oxford Branch resurrect the Southern Area Show. Its great success aroused envy and hostility from some other Branches, who thought they ought to have some of the glory and the profit. Inevitably, none of them could be found to put in the work that Oxford had put in, so the project was allowed to fizzle out to the detriment of the hobby and of showing in general. But history marches on, and Bill and Cathy continued to develop the Oxford Branch Show with the support of an enthusiastic Branch Committee. The recent disappointment at Birmingham and humiliation at Zone 6 have served to highlight the fact that Oxford is now effectively the Southern Area Show.

[NOTE to Branch Members: **Please bring raffle prizes.**]

TRUE GRIT

Cornish Grit is a useful ingredient in compost mixes. It is rich in minerals, being crushed grey granite. It is very useful indeed for making up specialist composts for those few plants that prefer living in granite, such as Navajoas, and those that will die if they are not grown in granite, such as *Conophytum turrigerum*. But it has been difficult to find it in recent years. So it was helpful to learn that it is stocked by Cleeve Garden Centre off Junction 20 on the M5, about six miles towards Bristol on the A370.

CUTTING BARBS

John Watmough has risked the wrath of the afterworld by turning his late wife's conservatory into a plant nursery. He was just in time to receive 650 *Conophytum* cuttings from France, followed up by about 250 more Lithops and *Conophytums*, and 143 pieces of assorted homicidal opuntoids. The mesembms are intended to benefit, by exchange or sale, the noble purposes of the Mesemb Study Group. But the opuntoids (it being understood that there may actually exist on the planet some people who actually like these plants) are destined, with the supplier's kind consent, to be sold for Oxford Branch funds. At the time of writing they are waiting for (1) roots and (2) trustworthy labels.

LABELS AND LIBELS

In the opinion of a Cromwellian officer in the English Civil War, "The effective solution to a religious dispute is a brace of culverin." Those traditions die hard. Is it not noticeable that the

most pettifogging distinctions are those which create the most friction? We are aware of the hatred between the Big-endian “Senecio” faction and the Little-endian “Kleinia” faction. This used to be satirised by one Edward Macdonald of Kew, who satisfied visiting fanatics by having his labels on swivels, reading “Senecio” on one side and “Kleinia” on the other. Gillian Evison tells how she was abused and called an ignoramus (Gillian!) by a fanatic when she showed a picture of *Pseudolithos dodsonii* at a lecture. “You must know that it is not Pseudolithos but Anomalluma!” Gillian did not mention the fact that this plant hybridises vigorously with *Pseudolithos migiurtinus*. She might have said “Tot homines, tot sententiae” or in English “Don’t change your labels”. A stopped clock is guaranteed to be right twice a day. Opuntioids seem to attract an even more dangerous kind of fanatic – those who are always right when everybody else is wrong, but who change their opinion with their underwear.

The problem is compounded by certain nurserymen who put any old rubbish on their labels in the hope of selling plants that they can’t identify. I know who you are! And I can recognise your handwriting!

JW



The gardens of Foxcombe Hall on Boars Hill, Oxford, owned by the Open University in the South, were open to the public under the National Gardens Scheme on 18 May. In the house was an advertised display and talk about succulent plants. As I suspected, this was given by none other than our new BCSS President, Colin Walker. It attracted two cactophiles (me and Roland Tebbenham) plus a room-full of interested visitors, and Colin repeated the talk an hour later.

I then went on to spend the afternoon at the High Wycombe show, where the plants were of high quality. Fine plants displayed by John Watmough, John Warwick, Bill and Cathy Darbon, and Costas Papathanasiou were much in evidence. John Warwick and Costas scooped up the most trophies. I bought tickets for the High Wycombe convention in October; are you going?

David Greenaway

BRANCH MEETINGS JULY - NOVEMBER 2013

4th Thursday in month, 7:30 pm for 8:00 pm

*Please bring plants for the Table Show if you can -
each of these meetings except November*

25 July

DAVID SLADE

South Africa 2009 (Stage2)

David gave us the first part of this talk last year and he returns tonight to complete the journey. Stand by to be amazed at the flora and fauna of this fascinating country.

28 July

**BRANCH SHOW
WITH THE HAWORTHIA SOCIETY
Langdale Hall, Witney, 10.30 – 15.30
Lecture by Paul Shirley (Netherlands):
“A - Z of Caudicforms”**

22 August

RAY STEPHENSON

Genus Aeonium

Ray is the leading light of the Sedum Study Group and holds the National Collection. He has travelled to many parts of the globe and tonight will I am sure will enlighten us on another not so widely grown group of plants.

26 September

AL LAIUS

Sansevierias

Al has now settled into the job of Editor of the Society Journal and was due to give this talk last year but was unwell. There are very few speakers prepared to talk on this subject so this is a treat.

24 October

DR COLIN WALKER

Aloes through the ages

Colin has recently retired as the editor of Bradleya and is another speaker who is known world- wide. Tonight he will guide us through developments in this wide ranging group of plants.

28 November

BRANCH AGM

Followed by a talk by TONY IRONS on PROPAGATION

Tony has not visited the branch as a speaker before. He is well known through his nursery, so I am sure he will have some tips to pass on to those who grow from seed etc.

The usual Christmas nibbles will be available.

Cathy Darbon

Oxotica

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The Branch meets 7.30pm for 8pm on the 4th Thursday of each month (except December) at the Rose Hill Methodist Church, Rose Hill, Oxford OX4 4JP.

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EARLY DAYS

Memoirs of a Railwayman's Son

Twickenham 1950. As I have said elsewhere on the Branch web, I bought my first cactus on impulse at a garden gate sale. I then started noticing plants for sale in the shops, and buying a few of them.

I don't think that anything would have come of my interest in the hobby though, had it not been for a friend at Hampton Grammar School, Herbert Poole. Discovering that I had an interest in cacti, he invited me over to his house. In the garden was a small, perhaps six foot by six foot, lean-to greenhouse, staging on three sides and just enough room to get in, and absolutely packed with cacti. I shall never forget the impact of the sight and the hot, humid smell of this freshly-watered collection: I became addicted. He was a cactus 'pusher' without knowing it - he gave me some cuttings. I planted cactus seeds (from Kingston-on-Thames Woolworths) and Mr Sumner, the manager of the nursery further down our lane, potted the cuttings for me.

Poole had bought most of his plants from nurseryman Mr Rawlings just off the Great West Road (possibly it was Vicarage Farm Nursery). One of Rawlings' big commercial-sized greenhouses contained his personal collection which he had just started to sell off. Half were cacti and half were mysterious 'other succulents'. I bought a fair selection of the smaller low-priced cacti, and returned several times after that. The second time that I went round to Poole's he gave me a lot of succulents and some cacti. When I got home Mr Sumner lent me a real cactus frame, a wonderful miniature lean-to greenhouse about two feet wide; the 'roof' hinged up for access and the plants stood on tiered staging.

Poole told me about the London Cactus Club. He was already a member and suggested I went along, whereupon I joined and stayed a member for several years. We used to meet in a room at the RHS headquarters. A young, dark-haired botanist named Gordon Rowley was sometimes the speaker of the evening. Brian Makin was the editor of the club magazine, *The Cactulent*. I still have a souvenir copy of the magazine, but Gordon has all of them (of course).

Eventually Mr Sumner's miniature greenhouse was just not big enough, so the plants were moved into Dad's six by eight foot greenhouse, which was on our allotment as our garden was too small. The allotments were on private railway land just beyond the end of our lane, and were for railway people only. Dad (Alfred James Greenaway) was an engine-driver, working out of Feltham Loco, and we lived in a railway house overlooking the old Twickenham railway station. My expanding collection went in there, along with a mixed bag of other plants. In the spring of 1952 we lengthened the greenhouse to 15 feet, using old wood and glass provided by the nursery when they refurbished their greenhouses. The glass was darkened by years of soot from the steam locomotives that pulled the goods trains along the nearby lines, and it was very hard work to clean them. My uncle Bill did a lot of the building work. My 1952 diary records for the 27th of June: "Makin came. Showed him my collection."

I joined the Great Britain society, and sent off to nurseries for seeds and plants. Harles 'of Reading', actually of Lower Basildon, was one such nursery. Gordon told me that he used to cycle from Reading

to buy plants there. I sent for their 1951 seed catalogue which was a sumptuous affair, with every species illustrated with a line drawing as well as having a text description. I bought most plants by mail order from Churchman, and others from Smith, Gilbert (Romford), Worfield (Bridgnorth), Cole, Neale (Worthing), Blackburn (Preston), Green (Sheffield), Coward, and Uplands (Bristol).

In the autumn of 1950 I bought my first cactus book, by post, from Neales – their “Pictorial Guide to Cacti and Other Succulents”. A week later I bought “The Study of Cacti” by Vera Higgins, in Foyles bookshop in Charing Cross Road. The next year I borrowed, in turn, each volume of ‘The Cactaceae’ by Britton & Rose, from the Carnegie lending library in Twickenham; this was the original 4-volume set with colour plates. My next purchase was Borg’s book ‘Cacti’, for 42 shillings. Other books bought during that early period were “Cactus Culture” and volume 1 of “The Morphology of Cacti”, by Franz Buxbaum, “The Flowering, Cactus” by Raymond Carlson, and “Cacti” by Sir Oliver Leese.

By the autumn of 1952 I was starting at London University, and so decided to sell off most of my collection. I went over to see if Herbert Poole was interested in them. I had not seen him for a while, and was lucky to find him at home. He was on 36-hour leave and was wearing army khaki (there was conscription in those days). His cactus collection had gone and he was collecting army badges instead! Some would say he had a lucky escape. A week later a man came to see my collection and I sold it for £25 (a fair bit in those days, when petrol was still less than five shillings (25p) a gallon). He took some away, and came back for the rest a couple of days later. However, I kept a few of my favourites, so it was not a complete escape

from the addiction by any means. I have an accessions list to 1959, and it shows that I bought a lot of plants over that period.

I got a second-hand Ideal boiler in 1953, and installed it in the greenhouse with Dad; Uncle Bill came over and connected large-bore water pipes from the boiler to a large tank at the other end. I used walk to the allotment to stoke up the fire early every morning and every evening during the winter. I have a fond memory of going there one very frosty winter’s morning and seeing a trickle of smoke coming from the boiler chimney across the way. Even if the fire did not last the night, the water system kept the greenhouse warm enough for a while. I did not lose any plants from the cold.

In 1955, after UCL, I started full-time employment with Fairey Aviation, in Heston. When we had to give up the allotment (the Southern Railway company sold the land for houses to be built), my Uncle Sid – who was a carpenter – built a small greenhouse in our tiny yard at home, replacing the cycle shed that previously stood there. After my first marriage in 1963 I rented a first-floor flat in Merton Park, a couple of blocks from the site of the John Innes Institute which had just moved on. I kept the plants on staging which filled the south-facing bay window. I moved to Oxfordshire in 1966 to work at the Rutherford laboratory, and bought a house in Longworth village. Once again I kept the plants, buying a cheap greenhouse to hold them.

But here must end my saga of the Early Days. I moved from Longworth to Jean’s house in Wantage in 1984, and only got really serious about the hobby again some five years after that.

David Greenaway

WEB SITE USERS

oxford.bcss.org.uk

Summary					
Reported period	Month May 2013				
First visit	01 May 2013 - 00:42				
Last visit	31 May 2013 - 23:54				
	Unique visitors	Number of visits	Pages	Hits	Bandwidth
Viewed traffic *	349	471 (1.34 visits/visitor)	759 (1.61 Pages/Visit)	7,660 (16.26 Hits/Visit)	569.68 MB (1238.53 KB/Visit)
Not viewed traffic *			1,837	5,143	221.95 MB

* Not viewed traffic includes traffic generated by robots, worms, or replies with special HTTP status codes.

The log file *awstats* shows that in May (for example) 759 pages were viewed by 349 unique visitors out of a total of 471 visits, so most people looked at one or two pages only. Compared with the other months so far this year May's usage was pretty average. Variation across a month was vaguely cyclic, often with a low Friday/Saturday, but sometimes with big fluctuations.

Country by country, most pages were viewed from the UK, followed by China and the USA, then France, Germany, Japan, Canada, Chile and so on. The full list shows access from 42 countries. The log also shows all the host sites that accessed us, but only by their IP addresses.

In addition there were web-indexing robot/spider visitors; these were mainly from Googlebot, and others included MSN Bot-media and Yahoo Slurp.

90% of visits were no more than 30 seconds, though that is enough to capture a web page or browse a brief one. At the other extreme, a few people stayed on for over 30 minutes.

Jpeg images made up 66% of the viewing, another 33% were pdf files and 1% were HTML files.

All downloads by users are listed. The top 10 downloads were of Oxotica, most of them back issues from the archive (which now has a contents list for the issues), John's article 'Cactus Crawl', and the show schedule and entry form.

We even get an insight into the top pages viewed, and a varied lot they are – plant pictures, members' profiles, our events programme, cultivation articles, shows pictures, branch information, and members' articles.

67% of the hits came from Windows operating systems, 13% from Macintosh, 7% from Linux, 4% from Java mobile and 2% from Blackberry.

Top browsers were: 28% MS Internet Explorer, 20% Google Chrome, 19% Firefox, 13% Safari, 8% Opera. Smartphone users made up 3%. The list order varies from month to month. Interesting, eh? Well, it is if you are a techie!

Of the internet search engines, almost all connections were made from Google. Of access to our pages via links from other web sites, the BCCS site won out easily, though there were many others.

All the search key phrases are listed in order of frequency of use; the top few were *bcss oxford*, *othonna euphorbioides*, *sarcocaulon patersonii*, *hoya imbricate*, *euphorbia multiceps*, etc, etc.

The most frequently used search words were: *cactus*, *bcss*, *oxford*, *euphorbia*, *limestone*, *imbricata*, *mammillaria*, *corynopuntia*, *compost*, *Haworthia*, *Oxfordshire*, *succulents*, *site*, etc.

DSG

Big Bend or Bust

by Gillian Evison

As my guide book to Texas said, 'Big Bend National Park is not really close to anything' and unless you have the stamina of a Le Mans driver, it takes several days to get there. My roadie was dubious. 'There will be fun things to see along the way', I told him (not true unless you are into cows); 'it will be Spring and not too hot' (it was 30 degrees centigrade upwards); 'there will be steak' (at least this was true). After a couple of days of passing small, green, farmsteads with a few prickly pears even I began to have my doubts.

Finally, however, we broke into real desert country with real mountains and we were greeted with a spectacular desert thunderstorm as we drove into Marathon. The rain was so heavy we had to pull off at the side of the road and my home *Ariocarpus* watering regime suddenly seemed mingy. The stuffed fauna at the Gage hotel suggested that the local wildlife could be large and alarming.



and my belief that snakes would be long gone before we blundered by was shaken by coming across a largish black snake sunning itself on the rim of Seminole Canyon. Less than excited by the snake, I was excited to

find a *Ferocactus hamatacanthus* var. *hamatacanthus*.



The shaggy grey spines blended in with the surrounding vegetation and, had it not been for the red on the new growth, I doubt I would have spotted it from the car. I was expecting that once I reached the Big Bend National Park I would see many more but my sightings were few and far between and many of the plants were dead.

Between Marathon and the entrance to the National Park, we stopped off at the Judge Roy Bean Visitor Center in Langtry. A late 19th century saloon keeper and adventurer, Bean's claim to fame rested on the often bizarre rulings he meted out as a justice of the peace in Langtry, the hamlet he named after the English actress Lillie Langtry, of whom he was a devoted fan. The Center turned out to have a well laid out cactus garden



that even included *Ariocarpus fissuratus*, the closest I was going to get to seeing them in habitat on this trip.



We had arrived at the Big Bend in time to see the Echinocereus and the Yuccas in flower. Dagger Flats had some spectacular *Yucca faxoniana*



and in their shade some handsome Coryphanthas. As always, identifying something away from the safety of a nicely

labelled greenhouse plant left plenty of room for doubt but they seemed close to my field guide's images for *Coryphantha echinus* var. *Robusta*.



and my driver began to question whether it was strictly necessary to get out of the car every time I saw one, though even he admitted the flowers were stunning. It was great to see a signature plant from my early *Observer's Book of Cacti* and, as with many a field trip, I was left thinking that I must try and find space for this in my greenhouse again. The other fabulous denizen of the alluvial plains was *Echinocactus horizonthalonius*

The flat alluvial plains were home to *Echinocereus dasyacanthus*





My driver couldn't understand the fuss and just looked baffled as I tried to explain the thrill of seeing one of our favourite greenhouse plants out in the field.

Limestone ridges were home to *Coryphantha tuberculosa*, living up to its common name of the 'Corn Cob Cactus' with its distinctive bald areoles,



Echinocereus rusanthus,



and *Sclerocactus warnockii*.





A trip into the Chisos Mountains took us to higher elevations to see magnificent *Agave harvardiana* plants



luckily without coming across any of the local bears. I have a small rather sickly *harvardiana* specimen at home. Must try harder.

Feeling brave, we took a trip out to the Big Bend State Park, which has no paved roads so the trip to the Visitor Center and back took forever in our very ordinary tourist car. It was edge of the seat stuff, and our nerves were not improved when we came across a ranger's vehicle abandoned by the side of the road with a wrecked tyre.



Given the marginal suitability of our vehicle for the trip, we were fairly cautious but I did get to see *Mammillaria heyderi* var. *Meiacantha*.



My field book described it as the biggest *Mammillaria* in the United States. The ones I saw had some growing to do to live up to this description and were living in conditions that had clearly already been too much for the local *Agave lechuguilla* plants. When these Chihuahuan Desert signature plants go crispy you know the going has really got rough for the local succulents. The Visitor Center is set up for people to stay there and the rangers suggested that this ought to be on our 'to do' list on any future visit to the Big Bend as we would then have the opportunity to take advantage of the various tours they organise.

Having explored all the tarmac roads in the National Park and decided that the drive to the Visitor Center at the State Park was as much dirt road driving as we wanted to tackle ourselves, we decided on our last day to book a four wheel drive trip with Far Flung Tours down the National Park's River Road. We were assigned a Hummer; the lovely Erica was our driver for the day; and she came complete with a substantial picnic lunch with snacks for in between.





Erica was interested and knowledgeable about plants herself and had brought a really serious field guide, which was so fascinating that I found it difficult to tear myself away to look out of the window for plants. While effortlessly negotiating the four wheel drive through the rough patches, she gave us fascinating insights into local history and vivid descriptions of what it is to live in a borderland community. All respect to a lady who is building her own house from scratch on a desert plot on the days when she is not driving or river guiding for tourists! Unlike my regular roadie, Erica was endlessly patient, stopping and backing up whenever I squealed 'plant!'. In addition to seeing some wonderful *Pediocacti* and groups of *Ferocactus*, the biggest excitement was when I spotted my first *Thelocactus bicolor* ssp. *bicolor* plants of the trip.



Erica said that she travelled the road regularly and had never spotted them so it was great to pass on a plant location that she will be able to share with future visitors. Erica promised that if we go again, as surely we will one day,

she will take us to see the spot where *Ariocarpus fissuratus* and *Echinocactus texensis* grow beside the trail; something to dream about in the depths of the British winter.

The Starlight Theatre in Terlingua was the perfect spot to end a day in the Big Bend region.



The food was good, the locals incredibly friendly and there was live entertainment. One evening this included the 'Pearls of the Desert' Belly Dancers, who were more than happy to pose with my highly embarrassed roadie.



Terlingua also sported a Cactus nursery.



Whilst I wasn't brave enough to purchase plants to travel home hidden in my socks, I did pick up some Big Bend rocks suitable for adorning the tops of my pots, which the owner threw in for free alongside a polished mineral stone souvenir for my brother. As the businesses around Terlingua are literally carved out of the desert landscape, it always pays to check out the car parks and one of my best finds was a small colony of sizeable *Sclerocactus uncinatus ssp. Wrightii*, with their unmistakable spination and red flowers.

All good things come to an end and we headed out of cactus country for a visit to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico before the long road trip back to Houston. One final cactus delight on the way was a visit to the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center and Botanical Gardens near Fort Davis. The Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center has over 200 species and is one of the finest collections of cacti and succulents from the Chihuahuan Desert region in the world. The high elevation means that the cactus collection is kept under cover and I could happily have spent the whole day there but my roadie was restive,

unable to see the point of travelling half way across the world to see plants in a greenhouse.

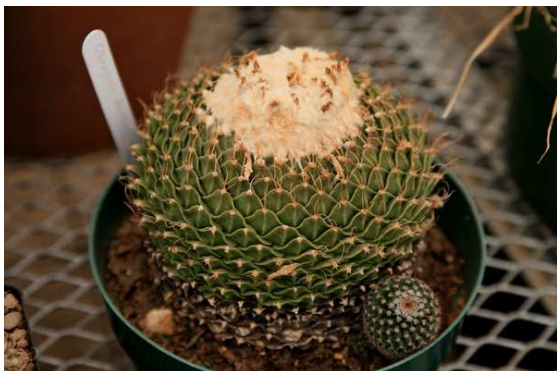


I was the only person in the reference collection that morning and it was a true privilege to be allowed to wander among and photograph such fine specimen plants:

Echinocactus texensis



Obregonia denegrii



Ariocarpus fissuratus



Ariocarpus scaphirostris



Astrophytum myriostigma



Scelerocactus mariposensis.



Despite the long drives, Him Indoors seemed to enjoy the Big Bend experience and over the last cocktail of the trip was even heard to muse about where we should go next time. Argentina anyone?



GE